Christopher Priest · Bob Shaw
Colin Wilson · Robert Holdstock
Garry Kilworth · And Others
Edited by John Grant

ARKEST 1

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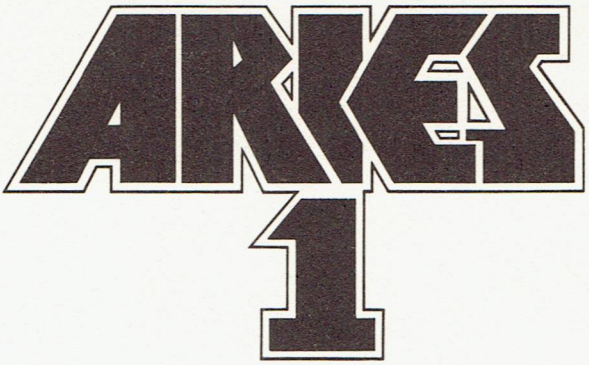
The mind of an ailing man is implanted in the body of a tiger; a girl keeps caged as a pet an infinitely wise alien being; life aboard a starship becomes intolerable when a plague of insects is unleashed; a semantics expert discovers that, through experimenting with his own brain, he can take glimpses at the past; explorers chart the expanding boundaries of space-time; colonists discover a paradise planet, but for paradise one has to pay a price . . .

Aries 1 is a new anthology of original science-fiction stories that cannot fail to please anyone in search of stimulating, thought-provoking entertainment. Its contents range across the whole field of science fiction, from hilarious space opera to evocative tales of human emotions, from purest flights of the imagination to grim warnings of the future that may await us. Among its many jewels are new stories by Christopher Priest, Garry Kilworth, Robert Holdstock, Steven Spruill and others; a new 'slow glass' story from Bob Shaw and Malcolm Harris; and the first science-fiction short story by Colin Wilson.

Jacket illustration by John Harris

ISBN 0 7153 7777 9

ARIES I



Edited by John Grant

DAVID & CHARLES
Newton Abbot London North Pomfret (Vt)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Aries.
1
1. Short stories, English
I. Grant, John
823′.9′1FS PR1309.S5

ISBN 0–7153–7777–9

Photoset and printed in Great Britain
by Redwood Burn Limited, Trowbridge & Esher
for David & Charles (Publishers)Limited
Brunel House Newton Abbot Devon

Published in the United States of America
by David & Charles Inc
North Pomfret Vermont 05053 USA

Contents

INTRODUCTION

If there's one thing that I hate, it's a pretentious introduction to a science-fiction anthology. It generally takes the form of a rabid partisan polemic on what is and what is not science fiction, and on what science fiction should be doing and ought not to do. It frequently denigrates sf of the 'thirties and 'forties, which is as useful an exercise as a modern physicist deriding Newton as an idiot, or the chicken criticizing the egg for its lack of mobility. As an extension of this attack, the grandiose introduction then lays into those sf authors whose writing is designed purely to give the reader enjoyment—of an intellectually stimulating kind, perhaps, but still enjoyment.

But this introduction will be short, will not contain a definition of science fiction, and will not be concerned with a gloomy (or even an optimistic) overview of the sf year to date. Such activities are best given over to my peers, who may discuss these matters while I am in a different part of the room. Instead, I will comment briefly on this anthology, and then let you free to read the stories it contains.

When I first began compiling *Aries 1* I had two firm rules. First was that the stories to be included would be 'hard' sf only; second that each story would have to be, in some way or another, 'special' to me in that I remembered it with pleasure for weeks after. The first rule was repeatedly shattered, not only by the stories that make up the final selection but also by those which very nearly made it into the anthology (fortunately, enough good material came my way for me to have put together, had I wanted to, two good anthologies and possibly another two publishable ones). This is not to say that all the tales here are 'soft' sf; far from it, but it does mean that there are more 'soft' sf stories than I'd planned (Christopher Priest's fiction is, he tells me, in the 'firm' sf category, which is fair enough).

The second rule, however, I've rigidly adhered to. Such things are always a matter of personal taste, of course, but I can honestly say that, were I to come across any of these stories in

another anthology, I would feel for it a great fondness. (This is the cue for you, the reader, to loathe each and every one of them.)

Why do I like them? Each for a different reason. 'Timeslip', for example, because I found it so convincing that I looked up a few bibliographies to assure myself that its protagonist did not exist; 'Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid', because I almost fell off my seat reading it; 'Flies in Amber', because it refuses to creep out of my memory; 'The Marble of God's Cold Lips', because it made me feel feline, pacing up and down the room, alert senses poised for the slightest signs of danger . . . I could continue until I ran out of stories, and I still haven't mentioned all my favourites.

I can only hope that you, the reader, find reasons that make each of these stories 'special' for you, even if they're not my reasons. Going by my own experience, one such story in any collection means that the collection has justified itself. I hope that you will find, among these eleven stories, not one but several, if not all, measuring up to such a criterion.

JG

Garry Kilworth

The Marble of God's Cold Lips

Garry Kilworth is one of the nicest people in science fiction today (no nicer than any of the other authors represented in this anthology, I hasten to add). He's also an extremely fine writer, with two excellent novels behind him—*In Solitary* and *The Night of Kadar*—as well as the much-reprinted prizewinning short story, 'Let's go to Golgotha'. 'The Marble of God's Cold Lips' is, in my opinion at least, an even better story . . .

1

The eyelids hung heavy as shields and opened with great difficulty to reveal a polished sky. The bright yellowness twisted and warped its shape, floating like an amoeba before him, splitting into smaller cells that danced apart, then plunged together again. Finally he managed to focus and turned his face away from the Sun with annoyance, a small growl escaping his throat.

The sound worried him but he was feeling too drowsy to follow the thought to a conclusion. He knew that he was not unwell but merely recovering from a long sleep. He lifted his arm slowly and with great effort to his mouth—and tasted fur. *The transmutation had been a success.* Rolling onto his side he began falling into a deep sleep again.

'Switch off the overhead lights,' he heard a voice saying softly. 'Let him rest. Tomorrow his system will have absorbed. . . .' The rest was lost in the humming of his brain. He fell asleep again with the strong smell of sweetstick burning his olfactory lobes.

He was Adam Marillac—or was he? He certainly wasn't the tiger—that was merely the fur, flesh and bone that housed his soul. He felt nothing like a large cat; he felt like Marillac, swallowed. In fact, he thought, he was neither of these animals. He was an idea, an abstract enthusiasm in another man's mind. An experiment. To be precise, Experiment T3—the T being Tiger,

of course. There had already been a D1 and a B2. They had been children, almost babies, and unaware of their cell re-arrangement.

'They had to put your existing cells through a multiplexer—there weren't enough of them to make up the tiger on their own. I trust you're comfortable? Also there's a silver stud in your ear—an identification disc of sorts. You'll need it later when we come to take you home.'

He dipped his eyelids. It still hurt to move them quickly.

Steen continued: 'We'll let you out into the jungle in a few days—I trust you're ready for it? No worries?'

No worries? Of course he was worried. More than that, he was terrified. The jungle was a thick web of black and green, damp horror. A tiger may be unconcerned with spiders, indifferent to snakes. Adam Marillac was almost insanely terror-struck at the sight of either creature. The thought of them made his throat muscles constrict involuntarily with fear. The jungle was full of snakes and spiders. The jungle was full of all those nightmares that had haunted him through childhood and into maturity.

Childhood had been spent in the usual way: kindergarten, school, university. Marillac tried to remember a single event of his childhood that was not related to one of these institutions—and failed. They took in an infant at four years old and from that point onwards, until the time came to find a job, they smothered the child with a learning administered within the surrounds of plastimetal furnishings and endless banyan buildings. Marillac had only once before stood under the unscreened harshness of a starlit, summer sky; had only once throughout manhood sat on dangerously damp meadowgrass in the wild atmospheres of a light breeze; had, that single time, smelled the hostile fumes of wild flowers. The excursion outside the city had been necessary to complete his education and he, like all the others, had been frightened by the weird sounds and the vast openness of the outside world.

But he had promised to live in the environment for which his new body was suited—at least for a time. Six months or so they said—barring accidents. Barring complications. Barring death from inside the tiger, or from without.

It was difficult adjusting to his new rôle in life, albeit a temporary post. As yet, his body was uncoordinated and he tended to

make foolish mistakes with the heavy limbs. Steen said he would get used to them quite quickly.

But then Steen was no expert on gaining control of an animal's body, a big cat's body—there were no experts. Steen was merely the sponsor for his transmutation. Together they were supposed to be striving to put together a paper—but it was Marillac who was taking all the risks. Steen just sat back and watched, pulling away affectedly on that old-fashioned drug of his.

When Marillac had first realized he was going to become a tiger he had studied the animal, both from books and live in captivity. One thing, a single trait, had endeared tigers to him—they were solitary beasts. Marillac was a loner and always had been. He had been married once but was now divorced. It was the marital state, the togetherness, that had been wrong, not his choice of bride. She had never understood why he left so suddenly.

Now he was really alone, divorced from the human race by a barrier only skin-thick, but impenetrable. Soon he would be entering that terrible jungle, undefended by the technology of Man. It was a sobering thought that he would have to kill, at close quarters, with his bare . . . claws? . . . to live.

They were standing inside the giant gates before which lay the jungles. Nothing stood between himself and the man, but Steen held a stunrod as self-consciously as a new general holds his rank; other pale, brittle men stood nearby, arms folded to make sharp triangles. Already Marillac felt alienated, untrustworthy. What did they expect he might do—swing a pawful of dagger-like claws at Steen's head, suddenly? This was all a bit uncalled for, a bit farcical. He even liked Steen a little.

'Well, old chap,' said Steen, swinging the stunrod by his side like a baton, 'hope you don't get too bored. We'll put some cooked meat by the gate each day for a while—you won't feel up to hunting for a bit.' He paused and pulled on his sweetstick, then added: 'It is important, you know. A lot of people will thank you for it later.'

'Or not,' thought Marillac. They wouldn't thank him if the thing was a failure—even if it was just the idea that failed. The breeze was changing direction and he lifted his nose to it. No

longer did the sweat of those armpits, or the fumes from Steen's stick, hang heavy in his nostrils. Now the scents of the jungle came to him: heady smells of fringe grasses, indefinable scents of strange animals, and, underlying all else, the deep odour of damp leaves. He felt a sense of anticipation mingling with his fear.

The following day the same sunlight that poured gold onto the grasslands at the jungle's edge ran fingers of fire down his flanks, playing heavily on the black transverse stripes of his hide like a harp. Was that psychological? Because he knew that black absorbed the light while the red-gold between the bars reflected it? Possibly, but he liked the sensation, even if it was mental rather than physical. He was beginning to become attuned to the new body, beginning to accept it for what it was. Marillac could never have imagined the pleasures of a cat before he had experienced them. They were more than sensual, they were sexual. The touch of the warm wind on the white belly-fur. The smell of musk thickening the air.

Being closer to the ground was an experience in itself. The hard-baked earth had its own beautiful smells, warm zones and traces of small creatures.

The jungle's border loomed before him, its black and impenetrable ribcage dripping with green and heaving like the flanks of some giant beast in the pulsing midday sun. He would not enjoy entering this living jungle. His jungle had been the steel corridors and compartments—the dangers of which walked on two legs and hunted in packs—the tunnel gangs.

He stayed on the fringe of the undergrowth that night, starting every few minutes or so at the sound of the lower orders of wildlife in the grass. While the human in him was afraid of the jungle's darkness and its unknown terrors, what constituted the tiger disliked being out in the open under a moonlit sky, and vulnerable.

When the morning came he tried to rationalize the two warring instincts inside him, and decided that the *tiger* had the least sensible of the two arguments, for a tiger's only enemy is Man—and Marillac at least had nothing to fear from that quarter. Nevertheless, he had to enter the jungle some time and it was better to do it in the light of day, fortified by a full stomach. Marillac pulled himself to his feet and padded towards the gate, and food.

They had lied to him.

Of course, now that he was thinking more clearly, now that the drugs had left his body he could see that it would have been foolish to give him cooked meat. If he became reliant upon the handouts of food prepared for human consumption he might never leave the vicinity of the gate and hunt for himself. Hence he would not pass into that ribcage of trees except perhaps for water. That would not be 'living the life of a tiger in its own environment'.

Moreover, the raw meat was still in the shape it had employed as a living thing: it was some kind of antelope; horns, hooves and warm skin. Warm? Marillac sniffed at the nostrils of the creature. It had not long been killed—perhaps a few minutes earlier. There was a neat hole burnt through its heart. He couldn't eat that, not a beautiful creature still retaining the ember-warmth of life. The whole idea was repugnant to him.

As he trotted towards the trees without having tasted the food, he realized that after two or three days there would probably be no meat of any kind by the gate. They would force him away from his last touch with civilization, using his hunger as a spur. That Steen character, that smooth-talking bastard Steen, had manoeuvred Marillac into this ugly position. Clammy nightmares threatened him from outside, and he, Marillac—timid little clown, cosseted throughout childhood because of ill health—was trapped within. There was no choice now. He began to panic and could feel that cat-heart pumping quickly beneath the fur. He was really trapped. He could throw that heavy-boned body at the gates and roar for all he was worth . . . no one would come, because *they knew* he had to eat, and to eat he had to find prey. He had to kill. They had him—Steen had him, just where he wanted him.

Marillac stopped at the edge of the trees and realized he was growling loudly. He pulled his mind back to his present situation with a jerk. It was tigerish, not human, to growl at the thought of revenge.

Close to, the trees were not as formidable as they had previously appeared and, with a preliminary cat-like sniff of the stifling air before him, he entered. It *was* dark inside, but more of a comforting darkness than a frightening one and he could smell water nearby. He would drink the water and then he would

sleep. It was a very thick, humid heat that enveloped his fur, damping it. He suddenly realized how tired he felt—during the hot day, not the night, was the time to fall asleep.

The leaves brushed against his glossy coat and he felt his powerful muscles gliding easily under the skin. He was power itself. Only the elephant could outmatch him for strength, and that was a huge, clumsy beast, unworthy of even standing together with the tiger. Marillac was grace, was speed, was fierceness, was lashing, spitting, frightening power. Before he reached the pool he could hear the other animals scuttling away through the undergrowth. *They* were afraid of *him*? He growled with pleasure. No one had ever been afraid of Marillac before.

In the half light he drank the brownish water, taking in weed and dead floating insects. As he drank he heard a noise above him. At first it was the sound of lizards running over waxy leaves, but it swiftly built up in volume until it was a thundering roar that made him begin growling again, until the drops eventually soaked through the thick foliage to further wet his fur and he realized what it was: a tropical rainstorm.

The rain lasted only an hour but during that time it was as intense as any waterfall. And afterwards the steam created such a heavy atmosphere that he fell into the sleep he desired, which lasted until nightfall.

That night he went back to the gate and ate the soft organs in the underside of the antelope, tearing open the gut and thrusting his face inside among the rank-smelling entrails. He hoped that Steen could not hear him. He felt he was debasing what was left of Marillac, but the hunger had to be satisfied. To his surprise he did not vomit, and afterwards, with the gore still hanging from his spreading facial hairs, he made his way back to the jungle to clean himself, determined to put distance between himself and the gate through which he was sure Steen was spying on him.

Marillac had met Steen for the first time at university where they had both been lecturers—Marillac in the cartography of near-space and Steen in zoology. Both had an interest in the idea of adaptation to planetary or even local outside environments by exchanging the shell that housed the 'mortal coil'.

Transmutation experiments, animal to animal, had been carried out with a great deal of success, but they had that element of

the unknown which made men recoil from any suggestion that humans might benefit from a reshuffling of their cell structure. People who had been moulded by their environment of enclosed cities were now the victims of their own protective measures: by isolating themselves from the elements they had made themselves dependent upon their own overcrowded but safe enclosures. They were weak, sickly, wan creatures for whom transmutation was a Godsend—if any of them dared to try it. People were not averse to changing bodies to save their lives but they were afraid of losing 'themselves' as they were. They were afraid of 'dying' within another body.

Once it had been confirmed that Marillac was wasting away because of an unknown disease, which would relegate his body to a hoverchair or similar device, he resigned himself to the fact that he would have to change bodies, ready or not. They could use the cells that were not affected by the illness, the 'clean' cells, and multiply them. He had to pay for the treatment, however, by offering six months of his services to Steen's experiments. Steen, being a zoologist, was naturally fascinated by the idea of getting 'inside' an animal to learn of its ways, habits and fears. That he was too afraid to follow the desire through himself was plainly obvious, but what choice did Marillac have? Having no control over one's muscles meant an unpleasant life in which uncleanliness took over as a matter of course. The thought alone was repulsive to him.

2

The tiger came to a river that threw itself, like something hell-bent on destruction, down the glades and over molar rocks. Never before had Marillac seen anything so beautiful and it made him forget his hunger for a time. Green plants dipped spidery legs gingerly into pools, and others, like scalps, hung loosely over the waterfall washing their strands. A tall white bird fished with its sword-like beak in the waters below, treading warily among the rocks. It stabbed once, twice, and came out with a frog which disappeared in a flash down the sapling throat.

Marillac desperately needed food—he had had nothing for two days. Settling down below the waterfall, he allowed its thunder to lull him into a dream-like state while he kept his eyes open

for signs of life. Some time afterwards a frog leapt onto the bank and stared at the immobile tiger. He flattened it with a quick paw and gulped it down. Several more went the same way. Even a small, once-feared snake met this unhappy fate.

Shortly after he had eaten, the Moon appeared over the trees and poured its cold light upon the jungle floor. There were men up there on that satellite, looking for useful minerals, building underground cities. Once he was back in the body of a man Marillac hoped to join them, and those on Mars. In his mind he began to recite the names of the pioneers of Mars: Lecker, Spitzendon, Alverez; but after three he stopped, unable to remember the fourth or subsequent explorers. He had always known them before—as a child he could reel off the first thirteen names without even thinking. Perhaps that was the problem—he was thinking too hard. Lecker, Spitzendon, Alverez . . . Alverez . . . but what did it matter? He had far more important things to consider than the colonization of the plants. (He *meant* 'planets'. Why did he think 'plants'?) Colonization. Governments had vague ideas about colonizing the outer planets, but were concerned with Man's physical ability to cope with the extreme conditions.

What if men were to change their bodies for those of animals? rumbled a theorist. Animals that *could* withstand the low temperatures, the varying pressures? Experiments with consenting humans (or parents' consent in the case of minors) were given the off-hand sanction and financial aid of the authorities. No one bothered to mention the other drawbacks: the lack of oxygenated atmosphere in which to work, the lack of food sources, the several other necessities of life which were not present on the planets. Why should they? It was another avenue of pure research, dear to people like Steen, that could be played with for several years before someone with common sense in a responsible position realized that money was being wasted.

A beetle crawled from beneath a leaf at his feet. He stared at it, curious to see what its mission was. The antennae waved and danced from its brow and its armoured legs picked cautiously at the ground beneath them. 'Are there beetles on other planets?' he wondered. He did not care for creatures like this, but all the same he was allowing it to pass over his paw for some distance before flicking it off. Perhaps the Moon was crawling with beetles? No, that was idiotic—there was no life native to the Moon. Then

why did he see these black, slow-limbed creatures picking their way across lunar webs—and why the visions of holes in the ground crawling with life? Men? 'They must be men,' he thought. Spidermen on the Moon. But even that seemed foolish and soon he dismissed the images from his mind.

That night, with his strength partially returned, he swam the swift river and on the far bank had his first successful hunt. Breaking cover by the water's edge he came across a herd of wild pigs, and with his scent hidden in the billowing spray of the waterfall he brought down one of their young. He was surprised at how easy it was. Marillac held the kicking creature down with his weight and sank his teeth into the beast's bloated belly. It screamed shrilly, close to his ear, and he almost let it go in surprise; but after a while the noise stopped and he could feel warm blood running along his lip. Ravenous, he tore open the skin and fed on the warm meat. In the moonlight the animal's eyes glazed as death came up fast and finally overtook it.

The day was always hot. He blamed it for his fuzzy thinking and for the way his feverish mind ran amok with unreal scenes. Perhaps he did have a fever? Animals became sick just the way humans did. He was crossing the grassy plains, between the jungles, and game was abundant. But the sun was merciless as he searched for some shade under which to rest—his head pounded and every vestige of comfort left him when he could find no cool place under which to lie. No thorn bush—not even a single tree. He knew he was a Mongolian and he was only just shedding the last of his thick winter coat. Steen had not worried too much about species.

'Just a tiger,' he had said, when Marillac had had the temerity to broach the subject; 'Nothing special about it. A big one of course. Can't have you getting into a fight and coming out the loser can we?'

Just a tiger, three feet tall at the shoulder and packed solid with muscle. A giant beast reaching fourteen feet in length. *Just* a tiger?

'Is a tiger very strong?' Marillac had asked.

'Strong? My God, there are some stories about tigers you just wouldn't believe. He's one of the most powerful of the land mammals.'

With these words Steen must have known he would strike home. A man as weak as a kitten, whose own muscles refused to answer the simplest of demands, would of course be impressed by strength.

'Even the pachyderms are afraid of tigers,' said Steen. 'They. . . .'

The stories, old wives' tales stirred into a modicum of truth, fell on eager ears. Who would not want to be a lord for six months of his life, afraid of nothing, omnipotent among the beasts of the field? Certainly not a wasted man in Marillac's condition. . . .

3

In the clearing were some stone ruins, covered in vines without and ulcerated by fungi within. There were some walls, almost hidden beneath grass and moss, and in the centre of the disturbed, roughly hewn stones was an old temple, the eaves curling at the edges like dying leaves. Spiders' webs spanned the points of these eaves—the frail hands of ghosts.

The tiger made its way up the steps littered with chips of quartz and twigs and paused at the tall entrance. Inside it was black and smelled of a dynasty that patronized the night and gave gifts of men's lives to a dark god. Entering, it found the first stone altar, blood-black where once long knives sang and struck; the second supported a cross-legged, greenstone idol the height of three men. The god had lightning cracks running through its torso, and the upper limbs, outstretched to receive its blood-drenched offerings, were stained and spotted with bird lime.

The three eyes were cold, hard and unreadable. They followed the tiger as it moved slowly around its base. Scratched on the block underneath, probably by some theologically ignorant subaltern of a foreign army, he read the words: *Brahma, Vishnu or Siva?* Under this misconception it said, *5th Infantry Brigade, the jungle bums.* Then, simply, *Harris.* 'No rank?' thought Marillac. The writer must have been a conscript. All regulars were proud of their rank, whether private or general.

Marillac stared again at the face of the stone idol. The eyes regarded him steadily and made the fur rise on his back. The figure exuded a heavy air of malevolence, a wickedness that time

had succeeded only in bringing to the surface of its shiny features. Its gaze was steeped in the knowledge of victimized children, struggling during the last throes of life. The high-cheekboned smile had grinned through a thousand attempts to sate its lust for the limbs of young women. And the glittering third eye, serving as navel in the overhanging belly, stared at its own gross parts.

Marillac's body was chilled to the heart. This was no god he knew of, no known religion. It filled him with dread. It was the god of some small dark age where men had lost themselves. An age during which they statued in fear at the sound of the temple gongs, and prayed that their god might go blind, or that some new benign presence would shatter it to fragments and take its place.

He left the halls quickly, despite his fatigue, vowing never to return. Outside he found a new, very real, danger awaiting his exit from the temple's black interior. At the foot of the steps, head cocked to one side in a typical feline pose, was another tiger.

Marillac paused and steadied himself. This was something he had not bargained for. This was the materialization of another of Steen's lies. Marillac was supposed to be the only tiger in the vicinity.

Now what did he do? The other half-shadow beast had risen to its feet and was regarding him steadfastly. It was definitely smaller than he was—a different variety. Its coat was a deep orange and black, in contrast to the pale, fuzzy markings that cut across Marillac. He could, he decided quickly, outrun this smaller beast if it became necessary. Perhaps, he thought wildly, the new tiger was another experiment? Another trapped man like himself, unable to tell him of his condition?

The tiger had covered three steps upward before Marillac growled involuntarily. The other stopped, seemingly puzzled. Would it know instinctively that he was a human in disguise? Would it smell his fear and know him for a man? *Would he have to kill this other animal in order to save himself?* My God, thought Marillac wildly, there's only one person I could kill right now, and that's Steen.

The smaller tiger began climbing again, cautiously. Marillac drew back his lips into a snarl and then gave out a hostile roar. Still it came, until the man-tiger could smell the sweet odours to

which his body, if not his mind, knew how to respond. There was to be no battle. Possibly a union, but no fight.

4

Some months later the two tigers reached the foot of the mountains and climbed up into the cooler air. The female was pregnant and the larger male, with the silver stud in its ear, wished to leave her in a place safe for the cubs before making a journey which he knew was inevitable.

They had had a good summer together, hunting and eating well: she had taught him the art of such livelihood. A small Sumatran, wearing her black-orange colours loudly, she would drive the game to him and he would make the kill. Once he had adjusted to a certain state of mind their teamwork became unbeatable, despite their mismatched camouflage. In the last jungle, set aside to cater for all the homeless animal species from all five continents, the wildlife was abundant.

His body suffered at times, from sores and chronic bladder complaints. Towards the latter she was silently sympathetic. But his sores were something she could actively doctor, by licking them clean for him where he could not reach himself.

It was a simple life, and in the early weeks he had thought he would go mad with boredom, but as time passed he found that hunting, resting, eating and caring for the other partner was a full existence with little time left for brooding. He found more and more that he had to think like a tiger to survive. She became angry when he made mistakes and chastised him with a sharpness that overrode his greater strength. He did not like that and pleasing her became his prime incentive in life. He slipped into an unreal state of mind. Unreal, that is, to Marillac's old way of thinking.

The mountains were not the place to spend the winter, but they were remote and the need for protection was strong in both the tigers. He settled her in a spot where small game and tall grass was plentiful, and eagles were scarce. There he left her.

The compulsion to retrace his wanderings was strong and there was a peculiar buzzing in his brain which he guessed was to do with the silver stud in his ear. She had tried to tear the thing out with her teeth but the pain had been too much and eventually he had pushed her away with a swing of his paw. It

still hung onto the torn flesh of his ear. His mind and this thing were moving his legs, running them in the direction of the place from whence he had come. His heavy bulk trod lightly through the jungle on the springs that were his muscles and the pads that were his feet. A face kept showing itself to his mind. There were other associated pictures which accompanied the face. He was vaguely aware that the man who owned that face had a name but the buzzing in his mind would not now allow him to stop and consider what that name was. He pushed on, into the depths of the trees, towards the shouting river.

('. . . remember Marillac, if you become lost, we can find you, with the scanners. That stud in your ear not only identifies you to us, but also transmits a signal . . . we shall be waiting for you at the time of the autumnal equinox, by the gate . . . if not, we'll search for you, so you won't be imprisoned within that body for ever. Just play the tiger . . . we depend on you . . .')

He swam the river, narrower than before since no rain had fallen for some time and the spring snows had all gone from the mountains. Coming out on the far side he rested on the bank, drying his wet, plastered coat until it fluffed shaggy again in the warm breezes. He dreamed the cat dreams of waterholes in the sun; of his female tiger turning in mock anger as he tried to mount her at the wrong time; of the electric ecstasy when it was the right time and the warmth of her coat burned into his breast; of the buck brought down in full flight amid choking dust; of the horned mother driving towards his belly as he strove to make off with his kill. These were the dreams of a cat and there were none better.

The buzzing sounded again. He had forgotten it on hitting the cool water. It must have ceased its noise while he was swimming. Now it was like a hornet loose inside his skull, tormenting him, destroying his dreams. He lifted himself to his feet, the left hind leg giving him trouble where he had bruised it under the weight of that buck. He felt clean and fresh and strong, though. His tendons pulled at thick limbs that had never bent in servitude. His shoulders heaved at the head of a broad back that would carry no burden. He was the tiger, feared by all. Even the snakes and spiders which he had once loathed were to him a matter of indifference.

('. . . we want to know, at the end of it all, whether you have

managed to adjust to your environment—whether you fit the rôle for which your body was designed. Above all, we want to know if, psychologically, you . . . well, frankly, if you're still sane . . . the stresses of such an experiment. . . .')

He began his journey again. There was not much further to go. The edge of the jungle was only one day's walk.

('. . . . you *will* be in your right mind of course. You're the ideal candidate for such . . . I mean you've been imprisoned in a useless body for some time now. It'll be a release for you, to be able to walk, run and roam at will—like a return to childhood . . .')

He broke out into the clearing at a run. It was past noon and the sun was behind him. Human scent had been strong for some time, rank in his nostrils: it quickened his heartbeat and he felt himself afraid. All his instincts rebelled against this meeting. They were men, and he had been, was still, a tiger. He could see them, waiting for him by the gate, their hands shielding their eyes. As he neared them he slowed to a trot, searching the faces. They had weapons. But the faces? One, no. Two, no. Three . . . yes! The name finally flashed into his mind: *Steen?* He *had* remembered at the last moment.

Steen was smiling. Constructed thoughts struggled to the surface of the tiger's mind. The man was smiling because the experiment had been a success. They had done it together, the pair of them: two human minds and a tiger's body.

He slowed to an uneasy walk in front of them, and they all began talking at once, laughing, gesturing and pointing at the silver stud in his ear. The movements were too quick, the sounds alien, and he hesitated, stepping backwards. The weapons of the men were lowered from their obvious positions, the owners seemingly embarrassed by their weight. They hung them down by their legs, almost out of sight behind their billowing clothes. And Steen was smiling, sweetstick between his teeth, nodding to his colleagues, each nod saying, 'I told you we'd make it—only the debriefing to go—matter of formality . . . look at my tiger: sleek coat, muscled frame, bright eyes, strong jaws and sane as Sunday . . .'

The scent of the sweetstick wafted around Steen's head and was funnelled to the tiger by the wheeling breezes. It clogged his

sensitive organs and red mist began clouding his confused brain. The already present adrenalin, making the blood surge through his veins, increased, until the fear drummed panic in his ears and his nerves were taut with terror. Someone coughed sharply and Steen's hand jerked out, too fast. The net spread, a flimsy bird-wing shape, above the tiger's head. The guns came up and hooks appeared in ready hands. It was clumsy. The net floated out and fell short. The gangling creatures were unskilled at capturing live beasts.

'Get him,' yelled Steen. An engine whined to life and a mechanical open-mouthed cage swept through the gates and descended upon the tiger.

The startled beast sprang from three yards away, jaws snapping at the narrow face. An object went spinning through the air like a smoking twig. The man went down, his spine snapping under the full weight of a mature tiger, his scream quenched by teeth that splintered the bones of his face and filled his throat with blood. The shock had killed him before the big cat tossed his body aside like a pet's toy.

Before the other men had recovered from the sudden attack the tiger was half-way back towards the jungle's edge. Then came the sound of thunder and the noise of humming-birds caught in the tall dry grass. Just prior to entering the green darkness a stinging pain made him snap at his hindquarters. Then coolness closed over him, brushing his body as he made his way through it with rapid movements. The pain in his rear continued but it was bearable. Not a death wound, merely a heavy discomfort. He rested, breathing hard, the blood still racing.

Men would pursue him now. Hunt him down like a man-eater of old. They would come as noisy birds, and stoop like eagles out of the sun. They would come trundling like warthogs with their hands full of death—and they had their own ways to follow his spoor, to track him by his scent. The buzzing in his ear had already started again.

The first of the pursuers came into the jungle cautiously. The tiger hid, lying on his belly in the thick undergrowth. They passed on either side of him, having nothing with them yet with which to see through the leaves. He was tempted to attack when the offensive odour was all around and his sinews were tight with apprehension. When their smells had drifted away he began tear-

ing at his ear with sharp claws, pulling, pulling, trying to scratch out the silver leech which drove him mad, now singing like a field full of crickets. Later it came free, with part of his ear, and he bit at it savagely for giving him so much pain, leaving teeth marks on its surface. His buttocks still hurt but the pain was dull and the blood had already stopped flowing.

On starting back towards the mountains he found the human trail was heading in the same direction and he felt the stirrings of fear within him for his mate. Humans hunting a tiger tend to be trigger-happy and do not stop to consider species or markings. They sight a tiger, possibly just the flash of a striped coat moving from rock to rock, and they make assumptions. They do not stop to make deductions when a man-eater is at large. They see, they kill—simply that. Some of them probably did not even know there was more than one type of tiger. They've seen one, they've seen them all, thought Marillac.

He thought about his unborn cubs and panic tightened his mind. There was enough of the old thinking left to know that he had to reach her before they did.

He travelled fast, not pausing for rest or food, and overtook them in a wide arc. They attacked in a noisy crowd as he was crossing the plain in front of them and came near to killing him this time. Only the high grasses saved him.

When they arrived at the foot of the mountains he let them know of his presence by walking through their camp at night, leaving his prints close to their beds. They had people watching all night, but no one saw him enter or leave. Then he recrossed the plains in the dawn, treading along a soft stream bank to give them an easy path to follow. Then he waited, on the jungle's edge, to let them have a sighting.

Unknown to him, the foremost member of the group of the hunters was approaching from another angle; while he was offering only a slim target to the main group, his profile was presented to this man, whose weapon sang just as the tiger caught his scent. A hole was burned through the fleshy part of his throat and he span quickly for the trees.

5

When darkness came he limped his way towards the place of the

tumbled-down stones, the temple with its smell of old deaths that had frightened him when he first became a tiger. It would be cool and dark inside.

The men came to the edge of the clearing just as he was climbing up the small, even steps. Inside were two large blocks, one bearing the shape of a man in stone. He settled beside this one, facing the door. Soon the sounds and scents of men were all around and he growled softly in his own throat, feeling the now familiar tenseness building up within his strong body. Then there was a man, just a small distance away, standing at the entrance, peering in at him. He kept very still, alert and ready to spring, his eyes on the man's eyes, waiting.

The man stared into the blackness of the room, his arm tipped with silver. The tiger could see the fear on the man's face, could smell it as it wafted into the enclosed space. There was no way of knowing if the man was frightened of finding a tiger in the dark or whether it was the place itself that was the source of the man's dread.

The buzzing began again in Marillac's head. This time there was no stud to blame—no irritant to scratch with his claw.

The sound was accompanied by a deep throbbing. Warped images slid into the room, from dark corners and recesses.

At the tiger's shoulder the criss-cross scratches of *Harris* began to dance: in the doorway was a new Harris, who would kiss the marble of God's cold lips. And God would suck the life from his body: God, the tiger and spirit of Marillac. Drugged with the old ways, what was once a weak man was now strong: Marillac—heady with the taste of Steen's blood.

He turned his huge head to look up at God. The stone chest was pulsing slowly, the old stone heart moving in time to the tiger's own.

His eyes went back to the figure in the doorway. Gradually the man entered, letting his arm fall down by his side. He trod softly over the slime-slick floors until he stood before God. Mesmerized, as Marillac had been. The man was a thin, sickly creature—did they honestly think Marillac could go back to a body like that? Steen had known, but Steen was wise in the ways of men.

Above, the stone eyes glinted triumphantly and the cold lips were wet with pleasure.

No, not yet master, replied Marillac. *Let the others come to find him. Then, soon there will be more and more. Now that we have one, there will always be others. Men cannot leave a mystery unsolved.*

A heavy atmosphere descended, thick with the heat and the cloying scent of God's breath.

You know we will serve you well. You gave her to me. They are your spawn.

Then came the sound of running feet on the steps outside.

'Peterson? Are you up there?'

The eyes of the man in the room remained on God's face.

'In here,' he called.

As the room filled with the stink of evil, Marillac's claws eased out of their sheaths. God smiled and began uncurling his own long, thin fingers . . .

Bob Shaw and Malcolm Harris

The Edge of Time

If Bob Shaw were to be remembered as an sf writer for nothing else (and he will be remembered for a lot else) it would be for his invention of 'slow glass', glass through which light travels at a far slower speed than normal, so that you can, effectively, look into the past. All the ramifications of this invention are contained within his novel/collection *Other Days, Other Eyes* . . . well, not quite all, as this story proves.

1

The alien ship had been showing on the sensor screens for days, and Demek had been interrogating it with almost every device in the building. The ship had not responded.

Demek's son, Monald, had actually suggested interrogating it with old-fashioned radio waves, but the laughter occasioned by this proposal had sent him scurrying to his textbooks to find out just why the idea was so ridiculous. When several hours of searching had failed to provide a good reason he decided to trade embarrassment for knowledge and ask his father straight out.

'Why, dad?' he said earnestly, trying to plumb the wells of experience which were his father's eyes. 'Why couldn't we at least try radio?'

'Well, son—look where the ship's coming from. No scientific breed goes to the Edge with the physical technology you're suggesting. It can't be done.'

It was obvious from Demek's expression, which was both humorous and mildly reproving, that he thought his answer very clear, but Monald had failed to grasp the subconscious basis of his father's philosophy. That evening he went to look for the radio transceivers among his childhood toys, and found a panoramic scanner which was still in good working order. He switched it on, coupled it to a panslator terminal, and had the

foresight, not to mention optimism, to link the terminal to the central computational installation at the Institute for Xenological Studies, half a continent away. He called the alien ship.

Immediately there came a reply, but in a language Monald had never heard before. *'Base Nine? Base Nine? Is that you, Base Nine?'*

Monald glanced at the panslator panel. There was a delay before it spoke in his own tongue, using two distinct voices to separate hard translation from inferred words and logical infilling. 'Base *indeterminate number?*' it said. 'Base *indeterminate number?* Is that you, Base *indeterminate number?*'

Monald said 'Can I help you? Do you wish to land?'

'Thank God I've made it,' said the voice. 'Though I'm getting a garbled signal from you, and I can't see a thing.' After another delay, shorter this time, the panslator gave Monald its tentative version.

Monald prompted: 'Keep talking. Are you in difficulties?'

'All my landing peripherals are on the blink. I've had to steer the home strait with my star scanners, and you know how useless they are for trying to touch down.' The panslation was almost immediate now—a sign that the central installation was coming to grips with the alien's language/logic matrix.

'Say! Have you got that swine Vad Cluly with you? I've got to tell Main Base something about him when I get down. I'm sick as hell and my landing gear isn't feeling too well either. I need signals from the ground. Get me down.'

'How much space do you need to land?' Monald asked.

'Hell! Don't you know?'

'This is the first time I've ever landed a ship. You'll have to tell me what to do.'

'Just my luck! I thought I didn't recognize your voice. You're one of Vad Cluly's trainees, I bet. There's nothing to it, kid. Just tell me my range, height, velocity, and so on, and I'll do everything on manual in real slow time. With the story I've got to tell, I don't want any mess-ups at this stage of the game. Vad Cluly's bloody finished when I get down.'

Monald began the long and exacting task of assisting the ship, scarcely aware of the night-consuming passage of the hours, and the discovery that morning had arrived gave him the idea for a piece of showmanship. He directed the alien vessel onto the thick

ferrocrete apron right outside the building which housed his father's offices and laboratories, completing the touchdown just before the first staff members showed up for work. There was a relieved silence from the unknown pilot who had been complaining bitterly about the absence of telesponder signals from Monald.

Keeping a close watch on the ship with the radio-viewer attachment, Monald said: 'All right—you're down now. Do your sensors tell you that this atmosphere is satisfactory for breathing?'

'Oh, bloody hell!' came the alien's weak reply. 'If this is Base *indeterminate number* then *of course* the atmosphere's OK for me to breathe. I *live* here, don't I?'

'I don't know you,' Monald said.

'Of course not. Not if you're new here.'

'I'm only moderately new,' Monald said. 'I'm nearly fifteen years old, you know.'

The alien sounded desperate. 'Go and find someone who knows what they're doing, will you, son? And get the nursing staff too. I'm almost too weak to move. Get them to open up this thing and get me out.'

'I'll be right over,' Monald told him, and closed down the transceiver.

He arrived on the forecourt at the same time that his father, a baffled expression on his face, emerged from the building. Demek took in the ship's outlandish lines in a single glance, then some intuition caused him to turn and stare at Monald. Monald was thrilled to see something like respect mingling with his father's growing appreciation of what had happened.

'I told you, dad,' he said triumphantly. 'I was right. The ship *does* communicate by radio—and I've just talked it down here by panslator.'

Demek smiled briefly, his only concession to family pride. 'I should have guessed you were up to something—I only hope I can smooth this over with the Council.'

Monald was unable to take any interest in such mundane considerations. 'The pilot thinks this is his home planet.'

'Reaching the Edge has disorientated him, obviously.' Demek pulled thoughtfully on his lower lip as he examined the squat, ugly bulk of the ship. 'It's so *primitive*. I don't see how he was

able to cope with any of the astrogation problems. Are you sure we're not dealing with a robot?'

'Pretty certain, dad. Robots don't swear like him.'

'Why doesn't he come out and see us? I've got to be getting on with my work soon.'

'He says he's sick, and we've got to go in and get him, with our nursing staff.'

'Hm. Sounds like a trap, and there's no military material anywhere near us at the moment. Aggression hasn't been entirely eliminated among the primitives, you know, and if this ship is anything, it *is* primitive.'

'But there's only one person in there, dad. He couldn't be a threat to us, could he?'

'I don't know, son.'

Monald's face showed extreme disappointment. 'I'm sure he's been telling me the truth, dad.'

'All right, son. If he's as primitive as his ship, your young mind could well be enough in tune with his to enable you to gauge him properly. I'll put my faith in your judgement. Let's see if we can open him up.'

Father and son walked around the particle-seared ship, looking for the entrance. 'I don't know, boy,' said Demek when they had completed a circuit. 'I don't see a way into this thing. Why doesn't he just come out?'

'There's a button there, dad. Under that transparent flap. Perhaps that's it.'

'No. It wouldn't be as simple as that. You see, there's got to be a . . .'

But Monald had lifted the flap and pushed the red button, and Demek stopped speaking as a small section of the ship's hull, previously so tight-fitting that the joints had been invisible, moved slowly outward from the frame-line, and then turned down and over to form a short, narrow ramp up into the craft.

Monald stepped forward, but Demek held his arm.

'No, son. I'm not sure that . . .'

He stopped short as his eyes came to a focus on something which moved in the dimness inside the ship. A figure appeared at the top of the ramp, an alien with the panspermic two-arms-and-two-legs configuration characteristic of intelligent species; but he was small and gave the impression of being very weak.

'Oh, God!' said the alien as he stared out at an alien world. 'Where the hell am I?'

He took two unintentional steps forward, collapsed and rolled down the ramp, to lie insensate at Monald's feet.

2

The alien had been placed in an auto-therapeutic cocoon which maintained his physical comfort while it monitored and controlled his medical condition.

'Tell us your story,' said Demek kindly, while Monald stood next to him making adjustments on the panslator panel. 'Tell us everything you think is important. Do you know what I mean? Assume that we know virtually nothing. Don't leave anything to be understood.'

'I don't know why I should,' said the astronaut, 'but if that's what you want . . .' He closed his eyes, an action which seemed to enhance the alien cast of his features, and began to speak in low, abstracted tones which were faithfully reproduced by the translation device.

'Right from the beginning, then. I'm one of a worker breed ordered to live on the planet we call Base Nine. My job is to fly the map-ships, like that one out there. You see, we are just beginning to explore the edge of time. I suppose I'd better tell you what that is, as best I understand it. The first thing you have to realize is that there are five basic properties which any object must have before it can really exist. I don't know if this is the sort of thing you are expecting . . .'

'Go on,' Demek urged.

'I can never explain these things really well. Mathematicians speak of a one-dimensional object, but you can't really have a one-dimensional object, can you?'

'A straight line,' said Monald.

'But a straight line wouldn't really *exist* if it didn't have a thickness and a width.'

'No, but you can imagine it.'

'Quite so,' said the astronaut wearily, and the cocoon panels pulsed colours to display the extent of that weariness. 'It would be an imaginary line—not *real*. My name's Ernie Foggin, by the way.'

'I'm Demek and this is my son Monald.' Demek showed no sign of impatience at the diversion.

'And in the same way, a two-dimensional object can't be real unless it's got a thickness,' the alien continued. 'Most people can understand that a thing *still* can't exist unless it exists for a certain amount of *time*. After all, if a thing is there for no time at all, then it isn't there, is it?

'But what most people don't understand—so I was told while I was doing my pilot's training course—is that, just as there are three dimensions of space enabling a thing to exist, so there is more than one dimension of time to consider. Am I boring you? I always find explanations very boring myself.'

'It's all very interesting,' said Demek blandly. 'Carry on.'

'Well . . . One of the dimensions of time is called presence. I don't know very much about that one, mainly because I don't understand how a thing can be called presence, and yet the thing that's got it isn't really there, not until it gets the other dimension, the one that's called change.

'Now change *is* something I've managed to understand. It all goes back to around Einstein's time. If you measure something, you change it. If you detect the presence of something, then it has changed you. See what I mean? If a thing has no effect on you, no effect whatsoever, then as far as you are concerned it just is not there. Have I made all that clear?'

'Yes.' Demek smiled and glanced at his son.

'Good—then you'll understand that the dimension of change was created in the moment before the Big Bang. Never mind all that . . . ('*bad expletive*' said the panslator) about the Universe being finite but boundless. The Big Bang took place at a point! Have you ever heard of a boundless point?'

There was no answer, so the astronaut continued. 'Ever since the Big Bang a raging ball of time has been exploding outwards from that point. That's the important thing to remember. A lot of people tend to think it's the material Universe which is expanding, but it's not. It's the dimension of change which has been exploding outwards, though in spite of all its funny twists and inconsistencies the edge of time is effectively static when you fly through it.'

'You mean you *fly* through it?' asked Demek.

'Well, not *through* it, of course, or you'd be lost for ever,

wouldn't you? I mean we fly *along* it, *in* it, round the edge—in the *skin* of time, if you like.'

Now Demek was really interested, although his voice had undertones of disbelief when he spoke. 'And you've flown back from the edge of time in a ship like that? How could it possibly be done?'

'Simply,' said the astronaut. 'I go up there with a ship crammed full of electronic memory—the main memory. And that memory is nothing more nor less than billions upon billions of pictures of stars, of galaxies—all the known Universe—along with the algorithms which help the computer to find the right pictures and compare them with the videos I'm taking in through my star scanners. They help it calculate whether a galaxy it's looking at is a known galaxy but seeming a million years younger—all that sort of thing.

'Then I've got a track-taken memory which records all the pictures that the star scanners take in, and adds to them all the course corrections that my ship makes. I do that maybe four times to cover the tolerances on ship reaction times and so on; that track-taken memory is then transferred to one of the discover-ships. That ship can then go up and fly the Edge, like an intergalactic cruise missile, using the flight program I've made for it; and that leaves room for all the equipment that the scientists and the mathematicians take up with them—and for their comfortable living quarters.

'Do you see? With time as non-linear and inconsistent as it is up there, there's no other way of flying except auto-visually. Dead-reckoning doesn't mean a thing—not until I've done my little bit, anyway. For the same reason, you can't use any of the ordinary beacons either. You just don't know if they're really where they seem to be when you're looking at them.'

Demek said, 'It seems a very crude way of doing it. Are you sure it works?'

'Well, I'm here, aren't I? Mind you, a lot of my map-pilot buddies have got lost, but that's the chance we all have to take. We fly suicide missions really—only this time it wasn't suicide. This time it was nearly murder. I've got to tell you what that rat Vad Cluly's up to.'

'Yes. Tell us about that, then,' said Demek. 'I think that will be very interesting.'

'You bet it is,' said Ernie Foggin. His eyes opened for a moment and his two listeners could see the hate and the triumph which swam in the dark pools of his pupils. The cocoon panels indicated a dangerous increase in emotion.

'You must realize,' he said, 'that no one wants to fly suicide missions, just so the scientists and mathematicians can make names for themselves. None of us *wants* to do it, but the system makes us.'

At this point he said something which the panslator could not understand. It translated literally, stressing the words whose logic it could not fathom. 'No wonder *bar-maids eat* their *babies*!'

This strange outburst had the effect of removing the danger-colours from the cocoon panels, and he continued with some bitterness. 'Not even Vad Cluly wants to do what he's doing, but at least none of us is doing it by passing off the work of others as if it were his own. That's what he's been doing, you know, and I've got the truth of it. My ship is the proof that he tried to murder me so that I couldn't expose him. Don't let anyone get at the evidence, will you?'

'No,' said Demek. 'We've removed only a few molecules, virtually, for examination. Your ship is very interesting to us.'

'I don't see why it should be. It's just one of those hack jobs, put together by a committee instead of having been designed by real engineers.'

'That's interesting too,' said Demek. 'We hadn't looked at it in that light. But you haven't told us what happened to you.'

'It doesn't take very long to tell, really,' Ernie Foggin said, 'but it might not have meant anything to you if you hadn't understood what I was up against. I was doing a normal mission and feeling quite confident about it. I had the feeling—no matter how many of my buddies might have gone through the Edge—that nothing was going to happen to me, because it never had. D'you know what I mean? I was right up in the Edge, and going fast, when I suddenly had this ghastly hallucination—I thought I was Jonah in the whale.'

'Who?' interrupted Monald, but his father gestured for silence.

'It was hideous,' Ernie Foggin went on. 'Everything in that

damned ship suddenly looked like flesh, you know? The pipes and the wiring looked like intestines and arteries and veins. The condensation on the hull looked like gastric juices flowing out of a stomach lining to digest me.' The weary astronaut stirred within the cocoon. 'But the instinct for survival is strong, isn't it? When you dream something bad is happening to you, you wake yourself up to get out of it. That's what happened to me. I got myself out of it, but, as soon as I did, it came back. I fought myself out, then it came back again. At first I thought I'd had an attack of solitude sickness, then I thought I'd been drugged, but the sensation wasn't really like either of those.

'Then I decided—and it turned out to be true—that it was my subconsciousness trying to warn me of something. The only way I could stop that damned whale from having me as a tit-bit was to go and find out what was wrong, to go and find out what was *really* going to chew me up, if you see what I mean.

'First I had a listen to the engines. They're silent really, you know, but some genius added sounds to them because it's better for pilots like me. Know what I mean? Even though you don't hear the noise while they're working normally, the slightest change in the artifical note warns you that something's in danger of going wrong.

'So I listened to the engines, and even though I tried to imagine that some subtle pitch-change had sparked off my illusions I could hear nothing wrong. Then I went into the main section—you've seen it by now, I expect—with all the memory gear and the computer in it.

'I've never liked that place. It's all silent. Electronics are always silent, and you've got no idea that something's gone wrong in there, until the lights flash. I'm supposed to sit and watch the lights all the time, you know—even got duplicates of them over my bed-space—but when you're always watching them you think you see them flashing in the corners of your eyes, then when you look straight at them you find they're not flashing at all.'

For the first time the little astronaut's physical weariness overflowed into his speech. His words became a drawl and he seemed to be talking to himself more than to Demek and Monald.

'I never did like those lights. They're enemies, always telling you you've got to do something . . . putting you in danger when

they come on. Give me the slow-glass lamps every time. Slow glass is my friend.'

'Slow glass?' asked Demek. 'What's that?'

'Never heard of slow glass? Go and look at it. Wonderful stuff! No power supplies, no filaments, nothing to go wrong. You shove it into a photon-flood charger, and the light you put in in a microsecond comes out gently and slowly for ten years. All the illumination in my ship is slow glass. We use it in the particle detectors, and in the nematic liquid-crystal displays.'

'Explain those,' Demek prompted gently.

'Slow glass gives up its stored light under stress. The particle detector registers little hairline tracks of light due to the minute stress paths caused by space particles. It's one of the easiest ways to detect voidons.'

'Voidons?'

'Voidons are the mist of no-time which still permeates the universal explosion, the eddies of time around no-time. I can see what was puzzling you—I called them particles, but they're not really. How could they be? They've got no mass, so they're not *real*, but they behave as though they've got mass. That's how the slow-glass particle detector detects them. They're just microversions of the edge of time, really.'

'Fascinating,' said Demek.

'And the nematic liquid crystals in my ship are simply transparent panels which suddenly become reflective when electrical charge pictures are built up on them. You shine a slow-glass lamp on them and you see all your fore and aft star scanner pictures in a nice bright light against a dark background. It's all standard stuff anyway, very old equipment. Goes right back to the twentieth century.'

Demek and Monald looked at each other at this, but the astronaut went on.

'We've got a set of names, us map-pilots, for the pictures we get on those displays. Something normal and stable is called a serenity of stars. Something wild and changing, too fast even for the computer to deal with, we call a migraine of stars . . .'

Demek interrupted. 'Very interesting; poetic, even. But are these things important to your story?' He glanced anxiously at the lights of the cocoon panel. 'You're very weak and sadly undernourished, you know.'

'Sorry, but you did tell me to explain everything, as if you knew nothing.'

Demek nodded. 'You said something went wrong.'

A wrinkle of annoyance appeared on the astronaut's brow as he picked up the threads of his narrative. 'I listened to everything, I looked at everything, but I could find nothing wrong. I was about to give in, and assume that I had been going mad after all, when I suddenly realized that I'd neglected to feel everything.'

'*Feel* everything?'

'The motion of the ship. It was slow in responding! The changes in the flight path were sluggish, not as crisp as usual, ever so slightly slower. Not slow enough to affect normal flight, not to stop me from getting out to the Edge. But when I was out there it could have meant the difference between time and no-time, if you follow me. A permament living death . . .'

'What did you do?' Demek asked.

'Well, I looked again—everywhere this time. I looked in all the equipment cabinets, trying to imagine all the things which Vad Cluly could have done to them.

'Then I found it—and it was simple! Just the sort of thing that Cluly can do without anyone seeing him—when he comes on board to approve the mechanics and their check-lists. I told you my ship was put together by a committee, didn't I? Well, right where Vad Cluly sits to call out that each check is OK there is a power-supply switch. You never touch it, you see. The switch is set to fifteen volts, and there it stays. When I noticed the switch it was set to twenty! Could be all right for a different ship, but not for a map-ship, not for mine. Only Cluly could have done that. I bet his fingerprints are on it to prove it as well. The check-outs would have shown up the wrong volts value otherwise.

'I could imagine him saying, "Checks all OK!", then winding the switch round to the next stop, just before he got off. Murder by power-supply switch! So simple!'

'What would a thing like that do to you?' Demek asked.

'Over-power the system. I forgot to tell you it was the star memory power-supply switch, and the memory devices can't stand the overload for more than a thousand hours, not at thirty-three per cent overload! That's just over forty days—and I'd been out longer than that.

'I thought my life was over. I reached for the switch to put it back to fifteen, then I remembered the fingerprints and got myself a screwdriver to tip the switch with—and then the whole lot went.'

Foggin's face became tense. 'The whole lot went up in smoke. Not in a fire, you understand—it was just that everything in my main memory couldn't stand the internal overheating any more. Every little component just bilged out a puff of smoke—and I was up there without a single picture for the computer to refer to.'

The little astronaut's face went slack as he remembered his experience.

'Is he too ill to talk?' Monald asked anxiously.

'I think he might be,' whispered his father, but aloud he said, 'We're listening, Foggin—tell us how you beat the problem.'

'That was simple, too,' Foggin said after a pause, 'although I had a bad time before I thought of it. Simple as anything—yet it's going to revolutionize electronics and space-map flights for all time to come.' He fell silent, seemingly on the verge of falling into a deep sleep.

'Tell us about it,' Demek was forced to prompt.

'I told you that slow glass is my friend, didn't I?'

'Yes.' Demek and Monald spoke in unison.

'I tried to be logical about it, you see, not to panic. I told myself that I couldn't escape without a picture memory, and those star map memories are the biggest mobile ones that have ever been compiled by Man. That's why the ship can't hold anything else, except for the drive machinery, and me.'

'Yes, yes,' said Demek. 'We appreciate that, but surely you had another memory, the one you were putting away for the scientists and the mathematicians to use. Couldn't you have switched the computer to that, turned the ship round and told it to fly home the way you had come?'

'I can see you know something about space-edge flight after all,' said Foggin. 'You know that even though space-time out there is non-linear it is still bi-directional. Yes, I thought of that too—but I didn't know how to do it, and I didn't know if it was possible to play the program backwards.

'There's the question of the computer's instructions to the flight controls, you see. I didn't know whether the ship would

be able to interpret them if they came at it backwards. But I did know that I had a reserve button to make the ship fly on a comparison technique, compare the star scanner picture with the track memory, and adjust its course normally until the received and the remembered pictures matched.

'And I think it was that thought which set me in the right direction for my discovery—that, and my friendship for slow glass. I kept saying to myself, "I must have a memory!" Then I asked myself what a memory actually was.

'On my ship, of course, a memory is nothing more than planes of picture points, but millions upon millions of them. A real picture has an infinite number of points in it—it depends on the resolution of your eyesight how many of them you see.

'This started me thinking about a *real* picture, made of light. It's still a real picture even when it comes at you through a sheet of glass—*which means that slow glass is a memory*!

'Slow glass must be a better memory than any electronic device because its resolution—the number of picture points in it—is infinite. It's the perfect memory because you could enlarge any part of the picture in it under the microscope and still see what you wanted to see, instead of a grid of television-type lines or something similar.'

Demek was intrigued now. 'That seems like a magnificent discovery, but how did it help you in your dilemma? All your reference library memories were already destroyed—you just told us that—so there was no way you could have taken all the pictures out of the overloaded devices and stored them away in the slow glass.'

'I could have done it, if I'd had the time,' said Foggin, 'but I had to work very fast in any case. I had no need to retrieve those reference pictures.'

'I can't see what you could have done without them,' said Monald.

'Don't you see?' Foggin was visibly weakening under the strain of talking. 'We just discussed that bit. All I needed was a safe track to get me home, and space-time out there is still bi-directional.'

Demek said, 'Sorry, I don't grasp it. How could you have used your slow glass to get you home, if you had no way of putting the necessary pictures into it?'

The difficulty of expressing himself succinctly caused Foggin to stir uneasily in the cocoon's embrace.

'Let me tell you just what I did. I knew—and surely you know too—that light goes through glass equally well both ways. So, the slow glass blocks in the nematic liquid crystal displays had inside them a complete set of pictures of where I had been, but going in the opposite way to the light which comes out to operate the displays in the first place.

'All I had to do was to take the blocks out of the displays, put them in the port and starboard particle detectors, and then unplug the detector cables from their normal sockets and plug them into the "Program Home" sockets instead. I told you my ship was designed by a committee, didn't I? You can't have designs like that unless you've got a high degree of standardization, and I knew that the right data-bits would be on the right pins in the plugs and sockets. I also knew that the power supplies and the strobe lines would be on matching pins.

'The computer wouldn't know where the signals had come from—it would obey them like a trained dog. I just turned the ship round, and pressed the "Program Home" button. There were a lot of strange mismatches on the pictures—I put spare glasses back in the displays later, of course—and here I am.

'I've revolutionized space-edge travel, that's what I've done! And this time no rough-skinned runt like Vad Cluly is going to put his name to the idea. I've won my escape ticket from Base Nine!'

'Well, I can see that you must have,' said Demek, 'but what I still haven't appreciated—I'm sorry—is this. You spoke of your glass having a delay time of around ten years. You then told me you had just over forty days' worth of pictures in your display source—so how could you just turn the glass round and start using it? By simple arithmetic you would have had to wait more than nine years before the home track pictures came out.'

'Yes,' sighed Foggin, 'that was the difficult bit. That was when the strain got too much for me, I'm afraid. I had to fly in the time-dark for a moment, and that was when I experienced the *real* fear that no-time was about to consume me. Time-blindness must be a terrible death, especially if you end up in a migraine.

'Anyway, I seem to have pulled it off without any trouble. I've been lucky, I suppose. Yes, you're quite right. The slow glass

would have taken all that time before the pictures came through. But slow glass gives up its light faster under stress, so I had to give it a precisely controlled amount of stress, above its threshold, to get the pictures to start coming through. All I did, before I placed the blocks in the particle detectors, was to lay them down on a flat surface, turn the ship round, and stress them with the reverse deceleration of the ship—which was very fierce—until I'd judged that the light was about to come through. That was quite simple because I saw the hands of the fitters setting up the nematic screens.

'But it was the hardest bit of manual flying I've ever done,' Foggin said, and his eyes flickered slowly at Monald, 'apart from bringing the ship down just now, of course.' He fell into an exhausted sleep, and this time it was obvious that no amount of prompting would elicit any further information.

'What are you thinking, dad?' Monald said, sensing his father's dissatisfaction.

'I don't know, son,' Demek answered, his eyes on Foggin. 'You remember that some ancient secrets, like the fashioning and placing of great stones without the use of machinery, have been lost until very recent times? You've heard discussion on this business of the great simple secrets?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I think this slow glass must be just such a secret.'

'But I've never heard of it.'

'No. Neither have I. And that's what's bothering me.'

'I don't understand your problem, dad. It must work, because it got him back from the Edge; and it's there for us to look at, if we want.'

'Oh, yes. It got him back, but I don't know . . .' Demek turned away from the little astronaut, who was now deeply unconscious, and walked towards the door of the treatment chamber. 'Nobody could control the depression forces on the glass the way he said he did. Think of the tolerance problem! He could have been a whole hour out in his judgement, which would still have been a fantastic bit of flying, but he could still have been totally lost with that hour's mismatch on his program. For a one-hour discrepancy we're talking about a distance of light-travel through his glass of less than one twenty-five thousandth part of its thickness. Think about it.'

'I have thought about it, and I still have to agree with him, because he's here. He made it.'

Demek shook his head at what he was going to say. 'I don't think he did make it. I think he failed, and his enemy Vad Cluly has won. Consider the whole Universal theory for a moment . . . Big Bang, then expansion, outrush. Then slowing down, inrush, collapse, then another Big Bang . . . the process starts over again.'

'I know that, of course, but what are you trying to say?'

'I'm saying I think he failed, that he was bound to fail, although his gift of slow glass to our civilization should help to make him some sort of success in his own terms.

'I think . . . ' Demek looked back to where the astronaut was sleeping. 'I think our brave, weary traveller has travelled further than he knows. I would say he has come back to us from the universe before this one.'

Robert Holdstock

In the Valley of the Statues

What can one say about the author of those three superb novels, *Eye Among the Blind, Earthwind* and *Necromancer*, that hasn't already been said by the enthusiastic critics? Not much, just that Holdstock belongs up there among the Tiptrees of this life—except that somebody's probably said *that* already. He writes fiction in a number of fields under a number of names. His 'serious work' (his term) is published under his own name; here is a very fine example of it.

1

High clouds and the threat of rain later in the spring day made the arrival of dawn an affair of diffuse light, growing in intensity, rather than that particularly romantic vision of a sudden golden brilliance breaking low across the hills.

Watching from his open window, cool yet comfortable in his night robe, Alexander Arden found that he could not decide with certainty the precise moment at which night had fled and day had come. The land, the valley across which his room gazed, had seemed first to become an area of shadow; those shadows had continuously given way to further shadow, each lighter, each less stark and formidable than that preceding until—without being consciously aware of the subtle process of change—Arden observed that the valley was in colour, and the landscape appreciable in all its remote magnificence.

A thousand statues, each carved from some gleaming white stone, seemed to jut and probe from the sides of the valley; some rested gently upon the flatter land above the winding river; others appeared to move across the higher ground, the legs and arms of the figures given subtle life by the play of light and shade upon their facets. It was, Arden reflected, as if some giant yet sensitive celestial hand had scattered these human artifacts

across the valley, and they had lain where they had fallen, untouched by humankind or by the eroding fingers of rain and wind.

Wherever he looked, for as far as he could see down the steep-walled valley, the white faces of stone gleamed between the complex colours of tree and grass and the lichen-covered grey stone of the area, a thousand shades of grey, sheltered by a thousand shades of green.

With dawn came the smell of the unspoiled land, heady, fragrant, something of the wild flower about it, something grassy, something of the pungent odour of woodland and undergrowth; a little something of decay. Arden shrugged off his robe and walked naked through the french windows to stand on the corroding concrete balcony. His hands, on the cold, dark-tinged metal of the safety rail, found the contact of the iron a delight, a sensory extravagance. He turned his back on the deep, rich valley and leaned against the rail, staring up at the sculpted façade of his host's mansion, the ornate and complex designs upon the windows and walls a testimonial to the frantic desire of a single man to outdo nature in the carving of rock into bizarre and beautiful shapes.

At dinner the evening before, the sculptor, Peter Stavanda, had raised his goblet at the conclusion of the simple meal and leaned forward heavily upon the unpolished oak table. 'The beauty, Mr Arden, the magnificence of nature,' he had said, no hint of the Eastern European accent that Arden had anticipated, 'is its wildness, its irregularity—unpredictable of form, made jagged and free by the disorderly erosion of time.'

He had leaned back, staring at Arden through those intense blue eyes that disturbed the young Englishman so much. Arden guessed that Stavanda was some thirty years older than himself; his thick white hair and crinkled, wind-tanned skin gave him the look of a medieval sorcerer, perhaps of a man of wealth who has hidden within his private cosmos for more years than he can remember.

And yet the woman who dined with them, not his wife, nor even hinted at as being his mistress, was younger even than Arden.

Karina was slender, serene, her black hair tied formally and perfectly into a style that kept her neck free. Her shoulders, bare

above her translucent black gown, seemed never to rise with her breathing, or fall when Stavanda's conversation reached its depths of grossness. She smiled only thinly at the Englishman, a cold expression that might have symbolized an English coldness of the heart so prevalent among Arden's countrymen. And yet she, this serene woman, knew that Arden was not a man lacking in passion: her eyes, dark, depthless, a Mediterranean warmth about them, an anger, a sexual hunger for the Englishman in every amber corner, her eyes seemed to linger on him, filling him with that same earnest desire to be alone with her that he had felt at their first meeting, in Paris three weeks before.

'And yet,' the sculptor again leaned forward, reaching for the decanter of wine, allowing his goblet to spill over onto the table before he ceased to pour; Arden was uneasy for a second, imagining that he sensed, in Stavanda's half-smile, some awareness of his own passion for Karina. 'And yet Man, most particularly as woman, is beautiful *because* of this contrast with nature!' Stavanda punctuated the statement with the edge, then the flat of his hand, pressed against the table, near to the glistening spill of wine. It was his most familiar mannerism, and Arden had found himself adopting it during the long evening and the simple, but drawn out, meal.

Stavanda had talked of his art for hours during the afternoon when they had sat so still, so formal after Arden's arrival, into the evening when they had faced each other across the coarse wood of the table. Arden was anxious to see the statues in the valley, for it was these that had brought him searching for Stavanda in Paris: doggedly, the hunter chasing through the reports from paper and magazine, trying to locate the elusive artist, ultimately locating him through the discreet promiscuity of his beautiful companion.

As his eyes lingered on Karina's lips and neck, remembering the taste of them, the smoothness of them, Stavanda was saying, 'Man is smooth, and rounded, he is regular and patterned. Man, most particularly as woman, stands apart from nature, arrogant, upright, different in every aspect from the jagged pinnacles of granite and sandstone that time has sculpted. Nature condenses into a myriad forms of life, all ordered and regular, microcosms of pattern in the chaos of the Universe. Man is the greatest of these, and to carve the pattern of man, and of woman, in this

cold crystal stone, the primal clay, is to fuse the elements of order and disorder, to bridge the Universe of animate and inanimate.'

He was silent, then, staring moodily, reflectively, at the remains of the roast duck that were such an ugly exception to what he had been saying. Karina politely sipped her wine, watching Stavanda with some embarrassment. Arden had watched her while thinking of the old man's words. Simple, perhaps even narrow, the words expressed that which had driven Stavanda through all the years of his life, fashioning pattern in rock, sculpting from his mind, through his hands, into the—what had he called it?—the primal clay!

'Man thinks and dies,' said Stavanda quietly, glancing up at Arden with suddenly alert eyes, narrowed, penetrating. Was he looking for some response, some furtherance of the philosophy from his youthful guest? 'The stone of the earth exists for all time without consciousness. What must the fusion, then, represent? What occurs when I shape the pattern of life in the crystal rock?'

'I have no idea,' said Arden gently. 'A permanence of form, but not of life . . .'

'Not immortality?' said Stavanda with a thin smile. 'Not immortality,' he repeated, almost despondently. 'Perhaps a persistence of memory?'

'The memory of form,' said Arden.

'But not of life; is that what you're saying?'

'Memory of life while those who remember the human who has been depicted in the stone are living.'

Stavanda laughed, then shook his head. 'But what of my life? No memory of that? The artist?'

Uneasy, Arden met Karina's steady gaze. She was regarding him coolly yet passionately, as she always did. She rarely spoke. In fact, when she spoke it was always in whispers, as if she were afraid for her voice to rise above the barely audible.

'When one carves so realistically,' said Arden, 'it is always easier to see the life represented in the stone, rather than the life that shaped the stone.'

Stavanda shook his head, not in disagreement, but almost fatalistically. 'We still talk of a persistence of memory, an echo, a representation of some energy that has transiently involved itself with the stone. Is there nothing more?' Again he fixed his gaze upon the younger man, and Arden reached for his wine to hide

the nervousness he felt. He had wanted to talk to Stavanda, to see his work, to record his thoughts, to profit by them . . . Stavanda knew this, and had known it all along. Surely he wasn't in some way trying to punish him for doing his job!

Arden was out of his depth, not because he felt the argument was beyond him, but simply because he did not care as much for the sort of talk that Stavanda wanted as he did for the sort of talk that Karina wanted, the quiet talk of night, of love. He knew the woman would come to him or, at least, that she would make it easy for him to come to her. Stavanda would, surely, be so often in his valley, among his statues, that there would be time in abundance to know this woman's body again, and her mind, and thus certain facets of Stavanda himself that the artist would not supply. In this way, then, in the way he thought, Arden was as much a sculptor as Stavanda himself, planning the manipulation and usage of his material in order to produce something that would be memorable.

'To fuse the animate and the inanimate . . .' Stavanda said slowly, almost soberly, staring at the Englishman with an expression Arden thought might have been contempt, 'must be to create something . . . something *more* than memory. Surely.'

'Some creature of stone? Of primal clay?' said Arden, and smiled. His face was flushed and he felt hot. 'A golem?'

'Some force of energy, of life,' said the sculptor. 'Something that is neither flesh nor stone, something . . . something that is neither, and yet is both . . .'

Arden said, 'A golem. You've created a golem, is that what you're saying?'

But Stavanda laughed. 'You speak, my young friend, as if nothing that could emerge from the union could be beautiful. But then, you've not yet seen my statues. You speak of golems, but I always thought such things were forces of evil, without true direction of their own. That you talk of animated life at all amuses me. I speak of something more than just the solid photography of human life. I cannot believe that a sculpture in living rock is no more, no less, than a photograph. One is putting too much into the shaping of the stone. There is a vision there; surely there must be a vision, a creation *beyond* what we think of as creation.'

Arden raised his glass, drained the sweet wine. 'I regret,' he

said, 'but I really do not understand what you mean. I feel that I should. I sense that you are aware of something which I, for my ignorant part, cannot grasp. Our perspectives are different. I am sure it will not diminish my pleasure at surveying your work.'

2

The clouds broke towards midday, as Arden walked through the valley of statues some way behind the silent, moody form of Stavanda.

'They are quite magnificent!' called the Englishman, overwhelmed by the power of the sculptures. 'Magnificent,' he repeated, and smiled as Stavanda stopped and turned.

'Is there not a life to them?' said the old man.

'Indeed!' said Arden. 'I begin to understand what you meant.'

He looked about him, cool in the brisk wind which accompanied the sporadic flashes of sun through the high clouds. He wore only his windcheater and jeans, but Stavanda himself was in a thin white shirt and loose flannels and must have been quite cool.

The sculptor didn't show it, manifested only a slight irritation with the wind that insisted on blowing his hair about his face. They looked back along the valley to where the house seemed to grow from the rock face of what might have once been a quarry, or a cliff too sheer for any plant to find a perch upon it.

'Yes, a quarry,' said Stavanda when Arden queried the site. 'Very old, very old indeed. Running through the rock is a wide vein of the stone I use for my carvings. White stone, crystalline; I could have told you the name of it years ago, but names matter less these days. I built the house myself. I carved the façades myself. I *am* the house, Mister Arden; if you like, I am the valley, I am these statues. I am my work, which is why I found it so frightening that you failed to grasp how an artist's life is represented in whatever lifeform he carves.'

He laughed suddenly, staring sideways at Arden, who was agreeing thoughtfully. The Englishman reached out to touch the porcelain-smooth surface of one statue that showed a man, crouching, staring into the distance. The sculptor said, 'Do you see any golems, Mister Arden?'

Arden laughed. 'I apologize for my naïveté.'

'No need to apologize,' said Stavanda as they continued along a winding path. They were several hundred yards from the river, but not hidden from it, for the trees appeared to have been cleared along a stretch of shoreline and Arden watched the cool waters enviously. He loved to swim in rivers, even in cold weather, and this river was as clean and crystal fresh as glass. Stavanda suddenly turned, blocking the pathway so that Arden was forced to stop, thrusting his hands into the pockets of his windcheater. The old man said, 'No need to apologize, because if you think about it . . . *I* am a golem.'

'Oh yes? You seem very fleshy to me.' Arden laughed nervously. There was something disconcertingly intense about Stavanda's expression and attitude.

'But a golem I nevertheless am, Mister Arden. Look around you. Look at the house, look at the valley, *my* valley. I shaped it, I shaped everything in it. I am an artist. I work in stone, in the fabric of the earth, the floor upon which you stand. I am a shaper, towards an end that instils life into the cold stone. I am *in* this valley, Mister Arden; I am in the rock that lies beneath your feet, and the white stone that graces your eyes as you look around. And that stone is in me, I am inseparable from my work; it and I are closer than two adjacent drops of water in that river down there. I am stone, Mister Arden; I am the golem that for a second, last night, you feared to see stalking through the valley.'

'Metaphorically,' said Arden, unsure of himself again, nervous beneath Stavanda's intense scrutiny. He felt he was being tested, an appalling sensation. He didn't know what to do or say to impress this old man whose cooperation he needed both in supplying an article and in supplying the time for his interest in Karina.

'Metaphorically what?' said Stavanda. 'Metaphorically stalking?'

'Metaphorically a golem,' said Arden.

'As my statues are metaphorically life?'

'Indeed.'

They walked on, Arden growing restless with thoughts of Karina. He had hoped she would come on this walk with them so that he could at least look at her, smell her, have an excuse—occasionally—to touch her. She had not appeared at breakfast

and, though by nature Arden was impolite enough to ask where she might have been, he had not, somehow, found the words to phrase the question without advertizing his more subtle intentions.

Wherever he looked in the valley he saw the human shapes of Stavanda's life work. Naked figures, and couples, animals and abstracts, all smooth, all detailed in that precise and irregular way that tells of a truly remarkable eye for accuracy.

Here, a woman bathed her face, leaning above an unseen bowl; the sun on her flanks brought white life to the cold stone, and as Arden watched her so she seemed to move slightly. When he looked at Stavanda the old sculptor was half amused; Arden felt that he understood something of the old man's fixation with the frozen life of his art, a life not human, yet something beyond his own conception of human life. Further along the valley he came across a montage of lovers, legs and arms entwined in the early embrace of potential love; Arden walked about the carving, amazed at the detail, the sensuousness of the white stone as it fashioned the commerce of the unknown couple. Elsewhere a middle-aged man petted a dog, the age depicted upon him as it had hung, loose and awful, upon his living body. The dog was on its hind feet, paws within human hand, mouth open in that anthropomorphic smile that makes a canine such a pleasant companion.

An empty pedestal appeared between high heather; purple-fringed and unnaturally precise, it seemed out of place in the valley and Arden was puzzled to know what might have once stood upon it.

Stavanda, as if in answer to the unspoken question, jumped upon the white stone cube and turned about to face Arden, his arms extended.

'Here stands the artist, alive.'

'A self portrait?' asked Arden, and as he spoke his eyes found the thin markings of the chisel that spelled, in faint relief, the name Stavanda upon the base. 'A self portrait,' he repeated. 'Is it finished?'

'Years ago,' said Stavanda, descending to the earth again. 'I'm polishing the stone, touching it up a little. You shall see it tomorrow.'

'Thank you. I'd like to. Tell me, is there. . . ?'

He caught the flow of words in time, managed to appear distracted by some movement further up the valley.

Stavanda glanced at him, frowning for a second, perhaps angry for a second. 'Is there what? Karina? Is there a statue of Karina?'

Angry with himself, annoyed that his simple question, his simple inability to complete the question, must have sounded intensely suspicious, Arden quickly said, with a surprised smile, 'You've sculpted Karina? That's interesting. No, I was about to ask if there was a possibility of photographing some of your work.'

'Absolutely not!' snapped the old man. 'But believe me,' he added more gently, as he led the way down towards the river, slipping on the fern growth and steadying himself with his hand. 'Believe me, you will never forget my statues. They have an effect upon you. What you remember will remain with you always. Far better than cheap photographs.'

'The persistence of memory,' thought Arden with a smile as he slipped after Stavanda with only slightly more deftness; and, as he walked, so Stavanda sent a chill through him with his next words: 'I wonder, Mr Arden, just what you will make of your article and me. I wonder what a man like you will do with what he learns.'

'A man like me? What sort of man is that?'

Stavanda turned to look back across his shoulder for a moment; there was amusement on his face, mischief in his bright eyes. 'A man who pretends to know so much and comprehends so little.' He looked away from Arden. 'Or perhaps you know the value of my name, if not my art.'

Before Arden could answer they had reached the river. Here they stood and surveyed the statues that were half hidden by low-hanging tree branches and high-growing fronds of fern near the water. 'She is there,' said Stavanda, pointing to the right. 'I know you find her very beautiful. I should be a depressed man if you did not. That, after all, is why I share my love with her.'

For a second Arden was perplexed by the implication of spiritual shallowness in Stavanda's relationship with the woman evinced in his last statement. Then, his face burning, unable to look back at the old man, he walked towards the nude statue of Karina and stood before it.

She was seated, her legs tucked under her; she was leaning on one hand while her other seemed to brush back stray curls of hair. She looked across the water, serene, cool, as if she watched herself in the distorting ripples of the current. She seemed thoughtful, almost sad. Arden looked at that perfect body, the small breasts, the slender thighs, remembering them, remembering how they had been beneath his fingers, beneath his lips.

Love stirred him, made him redden and he turned away. He stooped and splashed his hand in the cold water, and, when Stavanda came up to him, he apologized.

'It's seeing her like this and knowing I must face her across dinner tonight. It's childish, but I do feel a slight embarrassment.'

The old man laughed. 'What an excellent liar you are,' he said, and when Arden met his gaze he felt as if he himself had been turned to stone.

They returned to the house, Arden quite weary from the extensive walk and frequent scrambling. Almost as soon as they passed up the shallow steps to enter the area of lawned foregarden, Stavanda excused himself and slipped away, around the side of the house and presumably to his studio, for soon after there came the distant, almost shrill, sound of a chisel working on stone.

Arden amused himself by walking through the shrubbery, past several greenhouses, and through an overgrown and obviously unplanted garden. A scattering of cabbages and potato plants told of previous years of cultivation, but now it was weeds and thistles that dominated the patch of ground behind the house.

He saw no obvious signs of the studio where Stavanda worked, although the sound of chipping continued, apparently coming from within the house itself. After a few minutes Arden arrived back on the front lawn, where he located an easy chair and watched the advance of the afternoon.

After ten minutes or so of quiet contemplation he became suddenly uneasy. He turned on the chair to look back at the house, and for a moment he thought he saw Stavanda watching him from the balcony of his own room. Strangely, the figure moved away abruptly; the sound of stone-working had not ceased; and Arden relaxed slightly, supposing that he had been deceived by

the reddening light and the fleetingness of the observation.

But he now found himself thinking almost obsessively about Stavanda, concerned not with the nature of his work but with thoughts of Stavanda's suspicions, or awarenesses, in relation to his guest and Karina. Surely Stavanda had not discovered about the affair in Paris . . . the man had spent most of the days walking alone in the streets and along the river, absorbing atmosphere and vision. His invitation to Arden to come to the valley had been warm and enthusiastic, the most noticeable moment of friendliness that Arden had observed from this insular old man.

His thoughts drifted away as the day vanished. Slightly perturbed at being left to his own devices he rose and walked through the french windows into the extensive drawing room that faced the terrace. He located the drinks cabinet and returned to his chair with a half bottle of scotch and a glass. More relaxed, he consumed several shots of whisky while the lowering Sun set the scattered statues to all sorts of fire.

As dusk covered the valley, and the statues became invisible against the universal grey, he became aware that the sounds of work had finished. He rose, slightly unsteadily, and returned to the drawing room. He walked through the hallway to the dining room, and here found Stavanda already eating. A place was set for him. Karina was not there, nor was the table set for her.

'Forgive me for starting,' said the sculptor, waving a fork by way of greeting, 'But I was reluctant to interrupt your reflections.'

'Not at all. I was quite relaxed.'

'And I was too damned hungry to wait.'

Arden seated himself, reached for the half-full decanter of claret and changed his mind. The scotch was repeating on him, and he felt dizzy and slightly nauseous. Roast beef had been served and he sliced a liberal portion, eating it alone, ungarnished. Stavanda finished his own meal, wiped his mouth and rose from the table.

'Forgive me,' he said, 'but I have work to do.'

And as abruptly and as rudely as that, he was gone.

Arden finished his slight meal and decided on a glass of wine. Eventually he decided on the whole decanter and took this to his

room where he lay down on the bed and soon slept.

He woke at a little after midnight and felt quite refreshed. The decanter of wine had spilled onto the counterpane of his bed and he guiltily stripped the covering and piled it in a corner. Combing his hair, removing his jacket in favour of a fresh shirt, he stepped from his room into the dimly lit corridor outside. Pausing at the farther end, by the room he knew to be Stavanda's, he listened hard for breathing. He heard none. Opening the door slightly he peered in, but the bed was made up, unspoiled, and the room had something of a stale, unused air about it.

He closed the door as gently as he had opened it, despite this being rather pointless caution. Walking into the right wing of the sprawling house he paused by Karina's room, listened here as well before gently opening the door and satisfying himself that her room, also, was unoccupied.

'What are you doing, Mr Arden?'

He was startled as Stavanda came up behind him, watching him suspiciously. Embarrassed, Arden smiled and said, 'I felt like some company. I do apologize . . .'

Stavanda smiled thinly. 'I apologize for deserting you,' he said, taking Arden's arm and leading him back to his own room. 'I understand the need for talk in a strange place, and I promise not to abuse your patience again. Karina will be here tomorrow. Goodnight, Mr Arden.'

'Goodnight.'

'Sleep well.'

3

In the morning, after a somewhat restless night, Arden arrived in the breakfast-room quite breathless from running down the stairs; he imagined Karina would be there, waiting for him, but to his disappointment he faced an empty room. The table was set for one.

The food was hot, smoked meats, eggs and toast. He was very hungry—the drink and his small evening meal had seen to that. Thus he soon forgot his irritation at again eating alone and filled himself with eggs, bacon and coffee.

It was only as he finished, and was rising with the intention of seeking someone out, that he saw the small white envelope propped up between two silver serving dishes. Opening the note he found it to be from Karina, asking him to come and find her near the river.

Smiling, he pocketed the paper and left the house.

It was a fine day, still slightly cloudy, but the sun was much more in evidence and there was about the valley that heavy warmth that characterizes summer; perhaps, even during the preceding night, spring had been nudged aside and the new season admitted.

As if to confirm the point he saw a butterfly, huge and speckled with brown and red colouring; it bobbed and weaved above the heather and the gnarled hawthorn until abruptly it stopped, apparently in mid-air, fluttering frantically. Arden walked closer and saw that it was trapped against an immense silvery spider's web spun between the branches of two small thorn trees. The gleaming body of the spider was suspended halfway between its lair and the prey, as if the creature were unsure quite how to approach this immense and violently struggling meal. Arden reached out to rescue the butterfly, but before he could touch it the creature had pulled free by its own efforts. The spider scurried back to its hidey-hole underneath the branch; Arden could see its trembling shape between the shiny and still life-like husks of its previous insect prey.

Walking on, Arden felt totally relaxed in the warmth. Even the statues seemed more alive, and he reappraised them with an eye far more sympathetic for the honesty of their appearance. They were, he acknowledged, masterpieces of sculpture. It was hard to believe that one man, one mortal pair of hands, had fashioned such beauty from the stone. A god, even two gods, would have been hard put to achieve so much.

As he passed the pedestal which the day before had been empty he found himself gazing at the canny, penetrating stare of Stavanda: perfectly formed in the white marble-like stone, the nude figure was crouched, hands clasped before it, watching him. There, in detail, were the deep lines, the facial sculpture that was the skilled work of time, rather than the chisel, but which was here chiselled in stone in such a perfect copy that Arden stopped and was amazed. He stared at the paunchy figure, the member

dangling low between the thighs, the flesh of the legs and arms still firm, but beginning to show signs of deterioration. This was the Stavanda of yesterday, not yesteryear, and now Arden understood why the artist had been so keen to get away, so urgent to be alone. He imagined that this statue, this self portrait, was made to age along with the artist himself. When Arden had arrived, a stranger in the valley, a rare visitor, the ego of the artist had been such that he could not bear for the Englishman to see a sculpture that was not wholly and exactly representative of the lifeform that had inspired it.

While Arden had amused himself with whisky and idle thoughts of the beautiful Spanish girl, Stavanda had been etching into the stone portrait those features of the past few years which time had painted upon his own wind-tanned flesh.

Truly, a magnificent feat, and a wonderful piece of art. Living art. Art that transcended the life implicit in the flesh and the time implicit in the stone, the primal clay that formed the image. Stavanda was right. The stone *did* live, in a way beyond the simple understanding of any man but he who was *in* the stone, and in whom the stone itself resided.

His name was called from a distance—a woman's voice that he recognized as Karina's. He scrambled down the slope to where the land levelled until it reached the river. He saw her; she was sitting on a boulder, in the shade of an old and wind-battered silver ash. She was wearing a wide, knee-length dress and an off-the-shoulder bodice—white of course—that flattered her in every way possible. He walked towards her, glancing, as he passed the spot, at the statue of her nude form that he had scrutinized the day before.

For a second he thought he was looking in the wrong place, for the pedestal he could see there was empty. But Karina called, 'Stavanda has it up at the house, putting a few touches to it. Always the perfectionist.'

Arden laughed. He greeted Karina with a light kiss on the cheek, then took her right hand in both of his and lifted the fingers to his lips. 'Not ageing the statue,' he said. 'There is no need for that.'

'Thank you.'

Unable to prevent the impulsive action, Arden drew the girl to his body and kissed her hard. She melted to him, entwining her

arms around him and returning the kiss with all the fierceness of one who has waited, impatient, for too many hours. Breathless, they laughed as they drew apart, and then walked to the river, to sit upon the empty stone pedestal and watch the water.

'Stavanda's talent is quite formidable,' said Arden. 'He must have worked every moment of his life to produce so many beautiful statues. He must produce them with staggering speed.'

Karina squeezed his hand and smiled. 'Stavanda never worked fast. The life of the statues grows slowly, almost agonizingly.'

'But there are so many!' Arden looked about him, seeing little more than tree and undergrowth, but knowing that more than a thousand statues—a figure that Stavanda had himself supplied the day before—were scattered throughout the valley. 'Are you implying that he didn't work alone? He had help?' Suspicious, intrigued, Arden caught the girl's attention, tried to pierce the coolness of her gaze so that he might discern Stavanda's dark secret. But Karina reflected back his suspicion as a millpond reflects sunlight.

'Does any artist work alone? Ever?'

More word games, thought Arden. She's referring to his talent, to that innate energy that drives him and which only he possesses in that particular form.

He said as much aloud.

Karina looked away, looked down. Arden found himself fascinated by the smoothness, the soft tanned skin of her face and neck, the full rise of her breasts, much revealed in the lacy bodice. The love in him stirred angrily, restlessly.

She said, 'When he was still an eternally young man—perhaps no older than you—the stone possessed him, became him, and he it. Since that time he has created almost in concert with the valley itself.' She glanced at him and Arden noticed that she seemed troubled, some dark thought, perhaps, shadowing the brightness of her face. 'It's as if the valley *is* the sculptor, working through his hands, and he is the white stone from the quarry embodied in the dexterous form of the old man.'

'Have you seen him work? Have you watched him?'

Karina shook her head and smiled, her moment of trouble gone as swiftly as it had come. 'Never. Stavanda sculpts from experience, using people he knows or has met as models. Every-

thing he does is part of a design; every action, every movement, every word he speaks, every drop of blood he sheds, all are for the sculpture upon which he is working, upon which the valley is working through him. But I have never watched him in the final work, and I suppose I never shall.'

As if tired of this idle talk, perhaps remembering—as Arden was remembering—their stolen nights in Paris, those several weeks ago, Karina turned and kissed the Englishman, hard and with passion. She reached for his shirt and deftly slipped open the buttons. The sun was hot and summery, the pedestal beneath them warm to the touch, if hard to their flesh.

They slipped off their clothes as quickly and quietly as if they loved in a private house and were behaving with silent discretion. She touched him, gently and expertly, and as his weight came down upon her, easily, feeling with his skin the contours of her body, so they matched and melded, so he sank into her, every part of him, in the warm sex in her where he knew he belonged. Her legs entwined about him, trapping him, and her arms wrapped so tightly about his neck and waist that he thought their bodies would fuse. She allowed him no movement save that of his hips, which he moved quietly, gently, lingering over each deep approach so that they could both feel the power of the other in the drawn-out seconds of pleasure that accompanied each completion of his entry.

They kissed, and when their tongues met her teeth clamped playfully upon him, nipping the soft flesh and trapping him, so that he laughed, caught in this enjoyable fashion, trapped like an insect in a particularly lovely fly trap.

Abruptly she pushed him away, untwined her legs and shifted her body so that he was forced to withdraw.

Arden felt a moment's panic, his heart racing as he glanced about at the trees and river, and at the slopes of the hill. 'Have you heard something? What is it? Stavanda?'

'He's watching us.' Her face was pallid beneath the tan—her eyes wide with fear. She suddenly shivered, drew her blouse about her shoulders. 'I should have told you.'

'Told me what? Where is he?' Arden stared through the shrubs and undergrowth, seeing only statues and the dancing patterns of Sun on white stone. 'I can't see him.'

Karina laughed, and Arden thought it sounded almost cruel,

almost pitying. 'Of course you can. Didn't I explain to you? He's everywhere, Alexander. He has watched you every moment since you came here. He has been watching patiently, waiting to trap you. Oh God!' She had stopped and suddenly winced with pain, her eyes closed, her hands touching her face. 'It's too late . . . too late for you, too late for him . . . for me . . .' She suddenly laughed again, this time with a tone of irony behind the sound. She looked at Arden and shook her head. 'It had to come to this . . . it had to happen that one day I'd love somebody. I'm sorry . . .'

Not sure of why he was so afraid, Arden dressed quickly and stood by the pedestal, looking at the semi-naked girl.

'Is he going to kill me?'

She shrugged. 'He's inhuman, Alexander. Quite inhuman. His art is all there is, and the valley is all there is, but the valley *is* his art—it misses only life, real life. He feeds on life, on my life, on your life, on the lives of all who come to the valley. He drinks their souls and shapes the stone perfectly because of it. People leave here as shadows, the shadows of statues. He uses me because of what I am—'

'An insect trap.'

'A life trap. You, more than any man, I think he would like to suck quite dry, to suck your very vitality.'

Arden felt cold sweat break from his skin as he looked anxiously around. 'To suck me dry . . . to kill me . . . my God, how long has he known about us?'

Karina looked puzzled. 'About us? He's known from the beginning.'

Shocked, Arden found himself staring at her, shaking his head. 'He's always known? Then why—then why has he waited so long to confront me?'

'He doesn't want to kill you because of your affair with me,' said the girl quietly, speaking as if she addressed a child. 'He wants to kill you because you are sordid in his eyes . . . and not just sordid, but shallow. Your writing is motivated not by inner turmoil, by some energy of imagination, but by material needs. He will never carve you in stone, but I think he wishes to suck you dry so that he can carve some darkness into the white stone, some imperfection into his perfect creations—' Again she winced with pain, twisted slightly on the stone pedestal, and touched a

hand delicately to her naked belly. Her eyes, when she met Arden's concerned gaze, were filled with longing. 'Alex . . . kiss me . . .' Her body seemed rigid, almost stiff. Slowly she reached for him, her desperation communicating itself through every forced gesture. 'Make love to me, Alex . . . love me . . . no, *no!* . . . swim, swim . . . quickly!'

He took a step towards her, drawn to her beauty, desiring her, longing to complete their lovemaking. She cried out, the sound of one dying. Arden turned and ran to the river, plunged in and surfaced out where the flow was fastest. He swam strongly, despite his sodden clothes, and found time to glance back, to the pedestal and that private place among the trees. Karina seemed to be waving to him, her skin quite white at this distance.

The river swept him fast, out of the valley and away from the danger that, in one sense, he had been aware of all along. He smiled to think that perhaps his escape had been a narrow one. He would have found it difficult to comment in depth upon Stavanda's highly personal view of his art and his life, and in all likelihood the article would have been worthless. Facing a cold and wet reality as he struggled against the current, tired now and seeking a place to come ashore, Arden came to terms with the fact that his real interest in Stavanda had always been a part of trying to impress the woman in his life. That brief affair had been worth the wasted effort of coming so far in search of such an unsatisfying art. And he was forewarned, now, against any future recklessness such as pursuing his dream of passion into the very home of the man he was deceiving. He felt pleased with his escape, although it grew bitterly cold in the water and the river swept him faster between the slippery banks.

Ahead of him, then, he saw a place on the shore where he might come aground and strip off his freezing clothes, to warm himself in the bright Sun. He swam towards the river bank where it jutted out into the water and was fleetingly aware of the Sun reflecting on something white upon the shore.

It was a statue of Karina, her body reclining, her arm outstretched as if waving, or reaching. The shock of seeing it made Arden lose his rhythm as he swam. He was swept past the place among the trees, and onwards into deeper water, where the river flowed faster, and grew colder, and colder.

And as he swam on, desperate now, struggling to find the

strength to keep himself afloat, he heard the unmistakeable sound of hammering . . . the sound of chisel working stone, with such excitement and energy that the ringing strikes were run together into a single passionate tone.

Michael Scott Rohan

The Insect Tapes

Michael Scott Rohan is an excellent editor in his own right and, at the very moment that you are reading this, is probably pouring scorn upon my humble efforts. In addition, he is an extremely fine writer. If you don't believe me, let me cite Ursula K. Le Guin, who described his tale in Peter Weston's excellent *Andromeda 2* as an 'absolute knockout' and added: 'The Rohan [story] is almost incredible as a first fiction sale. It looks like there's one to watch!'

There is indeed.

A Fly, that up and down himself doth shove . . .

(Wordsworth)

BUZZ BUZZ BUZZ WONDER WHY HE DOES! Here I am all alone in the *Argosy*, and who is me but a honey-bee? I do beg your pardon, but I'm the one with the Insect Tapes. The oxygen plants are being done the dirty to by the Colorado beetle which has also buggered the potatoes, and a moth is fluttering around in my head; it blundered in through my ear, attracted by the light of my last, my very last bright idea. If only I'd had the flower tapes on the *Argosy*, if only someone else had had the stinking lousy Insect Tapes—

But the thing I really dread
When I've just got out of bed

—sing the entertainment tapes which are not at all like the Insect Tapes—

Is to find that there's a Spider in the bath!

EEEEE! If only there *was*! I have a bath—though the *Drosophila*

flies have clogged the showerhead, they shall not conquer—I have, as I said before the insects, a bath. Somewhere. Somewhere in the spiders, that is, *among* the spiders, also the death's-head hawk moths, stick insects and dungbeetles that have made their home in the bathroom. It is blacker than black with them. I even blocked off the gravity and had them all over the ceiling, but some just scuttled down the walls and my bath would not remain in the bath. I had to keep getting up and putting it back and finally my jury-rigged cancelling switch went BLOOEY! and the insects and the bath—not the bath itself but its essential constituent, the water—fell on me oh they did oh boy didn't they. Have you ever—no you have not. If you had had six hundred-odd—very odd—spiders and sundry insects fall on naked cringing you, 'twould be *you* telling *me* this tale. *You* would have been the one with the Insect Tapes.

Oh, we can't do without them, can we—can they? Can all those canned colonists frozen in the hold, can they do without their flutterbysies and buzzingly beesies and so forth? No. I'd like to wake them, wake them, let the ants crawl up *their* noses, let *them* bathe in beetles, let the termites gnaw those sterile suspension tanks they snore in. Read in the Library what the book-lice chew not. Read how back when there was all that life on Earth insects was a natural enemy and us all overrunning if it were not for the nice sweet lovely SINGING birds. I do not have the bird tapes. The *Odysseus*, Joey on the *Odysseus*, he has them. Birds sing at least, even if they foul up the statues and say 'Pieces of Eight!' in your ear all the time like in the old movie the termites ate. Insects do not sing.

> *—from the store there shrills*
> *the cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever—*

Crickets do not sing, they creak like the door mechanisms full of squashed bug. I would like to take the guy that said crickets sing to *Il Trovatore* in a version for crickets. *I* have an aversion for crickets. You will find *them* on number 5 deck, where my gymnasium is. I try to pretend it's just my muscles creaking but it's no good. I did a backward roll and gooshed two hundred of them. Somebody—anybody?—want to buy the Insect Tapes? Buyer

collects, from the tarantula house that used to be Main Growth Control. You turn left at the cockroaches—Filipino roaches six inches long—knock three times and ask for archy. Step on the weevils in the carpet in passing, dodge the clouds of sandflies in the elevator and there you are and more fool you.

More fool me, to have bolted just because tarantulas kept popping out at me. Have *you* ever seen a tarantula pop? It freezes the soul, does a popping tarantula. Wouldn't *you* have bolted if you'd expected pretty little ladybirds and got poisonous perambulating pin-cushions? While somewhere in there the Growth Elements are still hiccupping away to themselves churning out seventy of everything in two sexes, no waiting, come and get 'em while they're hot! Some disaffected bookworms have chomped half the circuitry out of the controls which are now as dead as the bookworms, and the Tapes totter blindly about, occasionally stopping to churn out another insect assortment. When they randomly light on track 84400(b) I will have fleas . . . Still, perhaps they will like the Witchiti grubs better than myself. They cannot like the Witchiti grubs *less* than myself. The Library, in between stinkbugs and fireflies, informs me that the Australian aborigines considered Witchiti a delicacy. I'm convinced this was a bad joke played on explorers—The Abos' Revenge! My God, Holmes, how diabolically clever! They're like sausages with a viable metabolism. I was a vegetarian, you see, my Growth Elements set to turn out fruit trees and pretty flowers, miles and miles of edible and aesthetic vegetation of all kinds. But now the Control is out of, the flies feast on my sugar beets and all's hell. The controls I thought I could fix, taking the tarantulas in my stride—squidge! heeheehee—but now my right hand will be swollen for a week, from them and the Kongo ants in the emergency rations. They are INCHES long. Now the Growth won't stop, the Insect Tapes have the Hellstrom Hiccups and repeat for ever and ever, bugs without end, amen.

The mosquitoes and sandflies drain me of blood, the tsetses will no doubt put me to sleep before the sexton beetles come for me, however. How can one drive a stake through all the little bastards' hearts? Each night they rise from their weeny coffins, wrap their Insect Capes about their shoulders and rush forth to suck the blood of innocent maidens and failing that they find me. I wish they'd club together and *get* some innocent maidens—I

could use them too. I might even stake them to it—but isn't that my problem?

Yes, Sir, it all started with insects. The right kind—you can hardly see them. They call them the San José Scale—sounds like something you weigh your peyote in. Actually—says the library—they are *Diaspididae, Aspidiotus perniciosus.* Very *perniciosus* they are, too. They made my lovely grove of fruit trees on number 2 deck look as if it had dandruff. You can hardly see them as individuals, but en masse they coat your trees like ashes to ashes, dust to dust, if the whisky don't get you the *Diaspididae* must. So I ask the Library, the then gleaming, quiet, bugless Library what to do.

'Ah,' it says in wise paternal tones. 'No doubt some plant on your Tapes had some Scale eggs on it and they got scanned with it. When you reproduced the plant the eggs came too. *Hunc illae lacrimae.*'

'So what do I do, my mentor?' say I.

'Fight fire with fire. Ref. 331117(a). The Ladybird, or Ladybug (vern.), natural predator of diverse species of insects such as greenfly, San José Scale, etc. Comes in pleasing range of colors, especially shades of red, and various intriguing polkadot patterns. Unleash the Ladybird,' intones the Library from deep in its files, 'and your problems are over.' Indeed, I got ladybirds eventually, and they managed to eat most of the Scale before the locusts ate all the fruit trees. This leaves me with a food problem. From somewhere I remember reading some line in a poem about—

—locust flesh steeped in a pitcher—

My brain, my then still sane un-mothulated non-hymenopteral brain, set to work. An old poem, egad. What was a pitcher? A fragment of my now, alas!, extinct thesaurus referred me to '—phora; bottle; jug—' and there the termites had truncated it about the same time they clogged the Library. Aha! says I—'pitcher' is liquid, else things could not be steeped in it. The references bear me out—bear me out gently, ye burying beetles, when I am fly-blown and maggot-bait! Locust-flesh steeped in *pitcher*, eh? So I drowned a couple of them in synthoskotch. The result was hallucinogenic, I thought my guts were leaving me and going home to Momma, leaving me here tangled up in the

endless, ceaseless, peaceless repeating of the damnable Insect Tapes!

Dune-bug, moon-bug, was that a June-bug?
Beating on my temples,
Trying to get in,
Will it wake the neighbours with all this din?

There's a wasps' nest on the main control board and it's bollixed the settings. There's caddis-fly in the water supply. Cocoons hang from the astrocompass, blowflies and wasps drown the clear buzzing of the engines. Touch-sensitive controls—the merest brush of a dragonfly's wings would set them off. It does. I always rush and switch the lifesystems back on but the wasps defeat me. The motors have been slowed to a crawl, we progress as fast as a fly flies. I tell the *cantharides* to get out and push, but they ignore me.

Beep! What insect makes *that* sound? The fleas have at last sprung forth from the Tapes and are even now biting my eardrums. Beep! They're doing it again—have not the mosquitoes declared my blood supply a closed shop? Beep! The shipcom it is, but it will not be me they are calling, it must be the insects they want.

'It's for you!' I shout, but they are lazy buzzers and will not answer it. I have to do everything here, so I goosh a horsefly and press the control, ending the sorrows of a silverfish. A minute's fuzz, during which interval I do a dance with an inquisitive scorpion, then more fuzz appears on the screen. It is the hair of my friend Joey, face agleam.

'*Odysseus* callin', hiya, hi-de-ho! Caught you up, has I, you leaf-eatin' bastard? Why you slow down? How's tricks?'

My story spills forth like maggots from my last peach. He listens—and laughs! Laughs at my sorrows! Where is the brotherhood of spacemen, I wail.

'Listen, my little honky pal,' he says when he stops giggling, 'what you need is some *birds*!'

'Yes yes pretty birds you've got the Bird Tapes—can you duplicate me a set over the shipcom pretty please?' He frowns.

'Not at this range, whitey. Love to lay a set on you, but the signal wouldn' be that precise. Pick up interference, distortion,

you get blur, you get blurred birds and man could *that* be heavy shit! No way.' My wails and gibberings start the very ichneumons from within their caterpillars.

'But you doan' need Bird Tapes!' he bawls. All is suddenly very quiet.

'Man,' I say at last, 'you come over here and say that . . .' He shakes his head furiously.

'No, spook, I mean you got 'em already. In the Insect Tapes. No, doan' scream. Didn' that last RNA shot *take*, man? Insects can't exist in isolation—could anythin'? You shoulda seen that, dope—you got spiders first and they're not insects—they're *predators* on insects. Neither is half the stuff I see crawling over the wall behind you insects. What you got in these Tapes is a complete miniature temporary-type ecology to keep the insect stock goin' on the colony world until the proper ecology gets set up. Same with my birds—I got bugs and all kinda things on the tapes.'

'Then why don't *I* get any birds?'

'Could be your Growth Control—it was set for plants and mebbe ladybugs, right? Now *they're* small and simple—minimum settin'. Seedlin's and itsy bugs, man, that's nuthin'! But a bird now—big and complicated. On minimum settin' you get maybe an egg, but what use is that? All you gotta do is adjust the settin', no matter if you can't turn it off—and you can dodge the spiders long enough to turn one control! Run off, little pal, for I am now overtakin' you and movin' out of range—run off—'the picture fades',—and get lotsa birds, goin' CHEEP!' Fuzz fades into fuzz; he is gone, his hair melting into the static it resembles. I am gone also so fast I leave the sound of my own gibbering behind.

The Taped insects are like piped music, they get in your ears and up your nose. But I am as one possessed and win through to the Control, where I tap-dance with tarantulas.

Tip-toe
Through-the-tulips,
On-the-spiders—

A second to adjust the control and out pops a hummingbird which the tarantulas fall on with cries of joy, as on all the other

sixty-nine. At least this gets them off me but I object to providing the bastards with *haute cuisine*. Still I persevere, and birds are upon me, around me, above me, below me, they would be beside me as well only I am beside myself with glee for the *Argosy*'s an aviary and the Ouroboros Tapes have bitten their own tails. In a spacecraft there is no chance of achieving a balanced ecology. The bugs are doomed.

You would never believe what birds are necessary to an insect-oriented ecology. I could list 'em all, but I won't. I am now the best shot in the spacefleet and none of your goddam *clay* pigeons neither. There is something with a moustache that is apparently a night-jar and swallows and swifts that whizz dementedly about. Also there are other birds that eat my new fruit trees nearly as well as the Scale and the locusts, even if they do it more politely. Still, I am saner now and birds are easier to wipe out. What remains untermited of my plant tapes supplies me well enough, and I supplement that with the six thousand eggs I have deep-frozen. If I get desperate enough to eat meat there's everything from pheasant to *coq au vin*, since some dumb cluck raided my wine cellar and drank himself to death. No, it could be—it has been!—worse. I think I am free of all the bugs and all the birds at last.

Or am I? A swish of flight in long-deserted corridors; a far-distant cry, bleak and eerie, echoes across the chill stillness of the suspension tanks in which the colonists lie, the icy waste of frozen bodies. A glimmer of white wings in the cool depths of the engine room. I think I have identified it now, this big ghostly white bird. How it could be part of an insect ecology I cannot imagine. I must get rid of it. I am out of ammunition, but have cobbled together a crude steel-spring crossbow which should cope with any albatross. This could be a hell of a voyage.

Christopher Priest and David Redd

The Agent

There are three time-travel stories in this anthology, and one couldn't hope to find three more different sf stories . . . which must go to prove something, if only that time travel is a subject that will continue to produce good, original sf stories for many years to come. This is especially odd since, to the extent of our current knowledge, time travel is impossible—unless you want to jump into a black hole, of course. Enough of this: let me simply stand back and allow you to enjoy a very fine tale.

The end of dinner was signalled when the servant wheeled away the dessert-dishes, the plates clattering as the trolley moved across the uncarpeted boards. Egon Rettmer glanced at his wristwatch, noting that he still had several minutes to spare.

The servant returned, and offered the cigar-box to the two men: Rettmer, who declined, and Piotr Vassilov, who took a cigar. The two women were momentarily silent.

Rettmer watched Vassilov obtain a light from the servant. This moment was as good a time as any for him to move. Rettmer scraped back his chair, and stood up.

'Excuse me, ladies, Herr Vassilov,' he said, looking diplomatically between them, and turning away quickly.

In moments of irritation his aunt's German speech became overlain by her native Russian. She called sharply as he retreated: 'You won't be too long, Egon?'

'No longer than I have to be.' He did not yet know how long he would be absent.

He left the room, crossed the wide main hall, and went down a narrow corridor to one of the side doors. Outside the house he paused, collecting his wits. He was dressed formally in white. The cool darkness around him, broken only by the scattered lights of the town and harbour, made a soothing contrast to the bright, enclosed dining-room. His aunt's dinner-parties often

strained his patience; since the death of his uncle, her husband, he had endured many such parties. The cultivated triviality of this Territory's social customs seemed even more pointless these days, with the war spreading nearer along the coast. He had needed this escape from the dinner.

Rettmer took out a cheroot, lighting it slowly, waiting for the minutes to pass. At the start of this evening's party, there had been an unexpected, and not unwelcome, sign of interest from Heidi Bluehm, the young woman whom Vassilov had introduced as his ward. Rettmer had noticed a certain directness in the way she looked at him, and as they shook hands it seemed that her fingers closed on his with a greater pressure than was conventional. From his business affairs he had met Vassilov before, but not Heidi.

Her early interest had not been maintained. Rettmer had failed to draw her into conversation, and now, as he stood outside the house, he reflected that first impressions were rarely correct. Her brittle attractiveness had been dulled by her cool and distant manner; he had been glad to leave the table.

His aunt's house, Kurischen, was set on the high ground a short distance above the harbour. Rettmer drew repeatedly on his cheroot, wanting to finish it before setting off. He looked outwards, over the route of his intended journey. Shadows obscured the railhead behind the harbour offices—trade had almost ceased, because of the war—but along the breakwater the yellow lamps extended a chain of light into the darkness.

He looked again at his watch, then pinched out the cheroot and tossed it into the night. In two minutes he could reach the harbour.

If this venture failed, one minor result would be his aunt's displeasure. If it succeeded, she and her guests would suspect nothing. Rettmer smiled to himself, and began walking.

Soon he crossed the gravelled roadway, and clambered down the embankment to the railway sidings. A concealed points mechanism tripped him almost at once. He should have remembered to bring a torch, but he had no time now for second thoughts. He pressed on, stepping more carefully over the many parallel tracks.

Looking ahead, he could see no obvious guard on the harbour.

Silte, like all the Free Territories, was technically neutral, theoretically uninvolved in the war between the Republic of Nord-Deutschland and the powerful Masurian Autonomous Unit. In practice, Silte was already being 'protected' by the Masurians, in the same way that various other Territories along the coast had found themselves occupied by one or another of the combatants. Despite the absence of official news, it was rumoured widely that N-D forces were moving towards Silte.

Rettmer ducked under the single-wire fence between the sidings and the harbour buildings. He passed the harbourmaster's office, which was locked up for the night, and checked his watch by the illuminated clock above the door. The experiment was beginning. He set off on the long, exposed walk down the brightly lit breakwater; sea hissed and murmured against shingle far below.

Near the outer end of the breakwater was a Masurian soldier.

The foreigners had taken over many police duties. The soldier stood back in the shadow between lamps, his pistol holstered at his waist. Rettmer drew level with him. In this area a flight of stone steps extended along the breakwater to form terracing down to the water; at the lowest step Rettmer's hired boat was moored, among many other small craft. The Masurian was watching him, frowning.

If anyone had searched his boat thoroughly enough to find the concealed apparatus, he would be challenged.

Steadily Rettmer went down the steps. No challenge came as he leaped aboard. The light, outboard-motor boat was of the type used for short coastal journeys, with a raised glass screen at its front. He swiftly unclipped the painter from the mooring line, and started the engine. The noise seemed loud in the quiet night.

Red and green navigation lights glowed at the harbour mouth. Rettmer steered between them, heading out to sea. There had been no attempt to stop him; a strange exhilaration spread through his body. He felt the boat begin to rise and fall with the long, regular waves, and the sea wind blustered against his thin white suit. Even this late in the spring, the nights could be cold. At the end of his voyage, of course, it would be warmer.

Suddenly he was alert, staring into the darkness ahead. He could see the pale image of another boat, returning towards the harbour. Rettmer altered course at once, and he crouched down

inside the tiny recess behind the screen. He cut the engine. In the silence he heard the engine of the newcomer, throbbing distantly like an eerie echo.

The other boat passed a hundred metres away, nosing in towards the harbour.

Standing behind its wheel was a white, indistinct figure, looking ahead.

Rettmer closed his eyes; he dared not think about what he might see. He waited, counting the seconds until the other boat had turned inside the harbour wall and its noise had died.

A bizarre apparition, but it was a good omen. He was still on schedule.

As he restarted his engine, and went speeding towards the north-west, he gained a certain reassurance from the fact that he had heard no shots. For that other figure, there had been no trouble from the Masurian soldier.

He reached forward, groping under the dash. His fingers found and turned the concealed switch, and immediately a faint red glow shone from the signal light hidden underneath the panel.

The field-sensor was in operation.

On each of his nocturnal visits to the island, Rettmer always felt a truer sense of identity return to him. He had been waiting too long. Seven years of serving the N-D intelligence, of living with his genuine but unloved aunt in Silte, were too many years for sanity. A trip like this helped to clarify his mental situation. Although he never forgot his loyalties on a rational level, at times he forgot them on the deeper level of instinct.

He often wondered about his usefulness to his masters. His information had helped them to plan their occupation of the coast, but by now the planning must be over. The invasion so often rumoured in Silte was a fact: in one sense a fact, in another an imminency. The field-sensor had permitted him knowledge unique in Silte. On the coast behind him, invasion seemed likely; on the island ahead, it was already over.

Around him, the dark night was flickering.

The war had been inevitable. For true national security all enemies had to be eliminated, in the Karbenist logic common to both sides, and so the war had to continue until one nation had gained total victory over the other. Neutrals, if they hindered the

war, were considered as enemies; Rettmer had chosen not to be neutral.

Nothing of importance had yet happened in Silte; his intelligence career had consisted mostly of monitoring harbour installations and ship movements. One freighter unloading, another departing. Fuel and machine-parts coming in, manufactured goods going out. A solid and unremarkable little country among the Free Territories . . . yet the expanding Nord-Deutschland needed Silte for its strategic position, and for seven long years had used Rettmer's position in the harbour office as a source of information.

Tonight, he had further data of the usual sort to hand over, but his main interest was elsewhere.

The sea wind that had been chilling him suddenly seemed less cold. He stared ahead, seeing again the transitory shadow-motion in the flickering sky. In a moment he would be across—

It happened: the sky shivered abruptly into blue daylight, and night vanished. The high sun flamed above him. The chill wind had gone, and warmth soaked into his body.

He had crossed from a spring night into a summer day.

Rettmer stared around warily, then relaxed. The sea was a peaceful blue-green, empty save for one silver shape beyond the little island. In this future time, the fishing boats and freighters remained in their harbours, for the Baltic sea-lanes had been blockaded. The N-D forces were in control.

He did not look back towards Silte, knowing what he would see, preferring to postpone the sight until he was on the island.

He glanced at his wristwatch. Within a minute or two, his entry into the time-zone was exactly on the schedule he had worked out.

A few hundred metres from the island, Rettmer throttled back the engine. This uninhabited mound of rock and sand, with its few gaunt trees and patches of spare, scrawny grass, was home only to the seabirds and seals. A disused navigation beacon stood on its highest point, and on the far side a tiny jetty had been built by past generations of fishermen.

Rettmer guided the boat round to the jetty, tying up against the rough masonry. Some distance out to sea lay the silver-grey bulk of the N-D cruiser, anchored in the deep water. In case the watch had not seen him, Rettmer stood on the jetty wall, waving

his arms.

After a few minutes, a launch was lowered from the cruiser, and nosed towards him. On board were four uniformed men: a sergeant of the Schutztruppe, a paramilitary technician, and two ordinary ratings.

'Rettmer!' the sergeant called, jumping across to the jetty. 'We wondered if you would come.'

'It was a good time to get away.' Although his aunt, fuming at the dinner-table as he left, would not have agreed.

He noticed that the technician had gone straight to his boat, and had raised the cowling above the field sensor. This was the instrument which had enabled him to enter the future time-zone. The man removed the battery, and began disconnecting the recording drum. Meanwhile, the two ratings waited in the launch.

Rettmer had no interest in the mechanical work. He pointed up to the brow of the island's hill. 'How are we doing?'

'Go up and see,' said the sergeant.

The two of them began to climb the grassy slope, towards the summit. The occasional juniper bushes had been sculptured into low, grotesque shapes by the prevailing winds.

'You'll see how much better organized Silte is now,' the sergeant said, as they breasted the hill. Rettmer halted by the remains of the beacon, and gazed across the sea.

Silte lay before him, the town nestling in its wide bay. Part of the town was still there. The rest was a grim reminder, if he needed to be reminded, that he had travelled nearly a month forward in time. The town, normally alive with industry, lay shattered and seemingly empty. Nothing moved. Evidently the twenty-three-hour curfew was still in force.

'Very efficient,' the sergeant said, passing a pair of binoculars to Rettmer. 'Here, borrow these.'

As always, the first thing Rettmer looked for was Kurischen, his aunt's mansion. It was in ruins, as he had seen it before in this future time. The smoke which had been pouring from the old house, when he was last on the island, had now stilled, but the windows in the remaining upright walls were blank and broken. Today, by a trick of perspective, a green N-D flag raised on a commandeered building beyond seemed to be fluttering directly over the ruins.

After a while, he turned the glasses towards the rest of the town; in the last few days, he discovered, much of the rubble had been shifted to the sides of the streets, leaving the roads clear. A convoy of N-D personnel carriers lined the sea wall, and on the hills behind the town were the long outlines of several recently erected barracks.

Rettmer asked: 'How long before I would be safe in Silte?'

'You mean from today?'

This today; not his own normal pre-invasion today. 'Yes.'

'About three or four days. The internees will be released by then.'

The invasion would be chaotic. The Masurians would seek scapegoats; the N-D would search out potential resistance; everyone would come under suspicion. Only the N-D advance would be well planned. The sergeant had told him, though, that several hundred civilians had been shot by the retreating Masurians, who had believed them to be aiding the enemy. It was still not known whether Rettmer was among these victims, or among the internees who were being identified and interrogated in the camps. He questioned the sergeant about the massacre, but apparently the man had no further information.

The temptation was very strong to stay out here with the cruiser, knowing that he would be safe. But the N-D were pragmatic masters, and safety was relative.

Rettmer glanced at his watch.

The sergeant gave him a curious look. 'Are you in a hurry?'

'No. Just checking.'

They walked down to the jetty.

In his earlier missions to the island, Rettmer had noticed that, the longer he spent inside the time-zone, the more his personal sense of time was retarded. Once, he had mentioned this to the technician; the man had agreed that Rettmer's observation was correct, but would not discuss it any further. Normally, it made a difference of only a few minutes, and hardly mattered, but tonight—today, here—he was intending to stay inside the zone for longer than ever before. It would be a personal experiment, to satisfy his private interest; the N-D authorities need never know.

As they descended, the sergeant spoke with unusual emphasis: 'You'll need the field sensor for your return crossing. But as soon as you're out of the time-zone, remove the apparatus, smash it

and sink it. The Masurians mustn't suspect that such a thing exists.'

'I understand. And then?'

'Wait until you hear from us again.'

Rettmer nodded.

On the jetty the technician was standing beside his boat, holding a small metal box. In this, Rettmer knew, were the recording drum and other monitoring devices; presumably the field sensor itself had been replaced in its niche.

The sergeant asked, 'Finished?' The technician gave a nod, and handed the box to a rating in the launch.

Almost as an afterthought the sergeant went down into Rettmer's boat, where he picked up the roll of documents and stuffed them into his side pocket. Rettmer watched him; the papers were bills of lading, customs clearances and other forms, all painstakingly and riskily copied for transmission to Nord-Deutschland. The casual, careless manner with which the sergeant collected them seemed inexcusable to Rettmer.

He watched, still resentful, as the launch departed. Since N-D Intelligence had changed the pick-up point to this island, installing the field sensor for the purpose, his new Schutztruppe contacts had treated the papers with an attitude of indifference, almost as if his work was irrelevant.

After this slight, and after the crushing boredom of his normal routine, his little experiment would be a welcome diversion.

Rettmer steered his boat around the island, out of sight of the cruiser; instead of heading away he came back in, halting in the shadow of some shoreline rocks. He secured the boat with a landing-iron, then scrambled ashore.

They would be expecting him to depart for Silte. If nobody arrived to investigate his delay, perhaps he was less important than he had thought. He looked again at his watch; now he would test both the field sensor and his N-D masters.

According to his calculations, he had less than half an hour to wait.

Rettmer lay on the coarse grass of the hillside, the slight breeze bearing a tang of juniper to him. He felt oddly relaxed. His boat was safe down by the shore, gently rising and falling with the swell. Overhead circled white seabirds, squawking and mewing;

some bobbed on the surface of the sea. Probably, refuse thrown from the cruiser was attracting the gulls.

In the distance lay Silte Town, in the sunlight, pillaged.

Rettmer tried to imagine what must have happened as the N-D invasion force advanced on Silte: the cruiser moving into the bay, formations of strike aircraft swooping in from the west, a bombardment that lasted for days. Onshore, the Masurians putting up a fight, then a rearguard action. Through all this there lived or died the people of Silte, neutral but nevertheless trapped.

But most would have survived, as these birds riding the wind had survived. Perhaps it was better to be a bird, alive upon a remote island, than to be an N-D agent in Silte.

He consulted his watch. Six more minutes . . . and no one had arrived.

For the reverse crossing, the sky was too bright for any flickering to be visible. Rettmer aimed the boat for the unseen boundary, for the calm and empty sea. On the shore, nothing moved.

His delay on the island had gone unnoticed; apparently nobody aboard the cruiser thought him important enough to be worth watching. Perversely, he felt that their attitude seemed to justify both parts of his experiment. His return, if the field-sensor operated as he anticipated, would be remarkably interesting.

Confidently, Rettmer increased speed. The boat crested from one wave to the next.

Without warning, night fell.

Unbroken darkness surrounded him. Rettmer steered on blindly, trusting that the sea was clear of obstructions in his course, until his eyes became adjusted to the night. He could see the low blackness of the coast ahead, the string of yellow lights by the harbour, the windows and streetlamps of the town. It was all familiar: Silte Town, before the invasion.

The night wind was chilling him.

Rettmer walked up the stone steps to the concreted surface of the breakwater. The Masurian soldier gazed at him from under the lamp, his arms folded, his eyes and upper face shadowed by his peaked cap. To the Masurian, of course, it would seem that Rettmer had departed but a few moments before.

To hesitate now would be to invite questions.

'Low on petrol,' Rettmer said, and walked on without waiting for a response. He could sense those shadowed eyes regarding his back, following his progress, all the way down the circles of lamplight until he reached the main quay.

He passed the harbourmaster's office; according to the illuminated clock, seven minutes had passed. Yet his wristwatch showed that over an hour and a half had elapsed. Rettmer reset his watch, and walked on.

During past visits to the island, after his business had been completed, he had always set off back towards Silte at once, feeling instinctively that he should not delay in the time-zone. Always, on these past occasions, he had returned to discover that less time had elapsed in Silte than he had actually experienced subjectively. The round trip to the island normally took about an hour, but on his return he would find that only about fifty minutes had gone by.

Tonight, he had deliberately stayed an extra half-hour in the future, and only seven minutes had passed between crossings, by Silte time.

In other words, the longer he stayed inside the time-zone, the *less* time would elapse here.

He had already had advance confirmation of his ideas, when on the outward trip he had seen the white-suited figure in the boat, and on the return journey had seen a similar figure, standing off a short distance from the harbour mouth.

Each apparition had been himself.

Naturally, he had omitted to destroy the field-sensor. It could serve him again.

As he was walking up through the grounds of Kurischen, Rettmer realized that the seven minutes of normal time was far too short to include all his walking along the breakwater and his voyages to and from the time-zone. There could be only one explanation. He had returned *before* he set out.

Effectively, then, he could use the field-sensor for two-way travel through time . . . a month into the future, or any period into the past. It was a curious discovery, of which the N-D were probably aware.

He remembered a warning from the technician, some time

before: *Don't tamper with the field-sensor, don't invite trouble with the time-zone.* But his usefulness to the N-D was almost expended, it seemed, and nowhere in Silte was safe. The time-zone might be the escape he needed.

His flash of insight had occupied only a moment. He returned, at last, to Kurischen.

Rettmer entered the house through the door he had used previously, and went softly across the main hall to the dining-room. Here, little more than ten minutes had elapsed since he had excused himself: an impolite, but not unreasonable, absence.

He sat down in his place at the table. The girl, Heidi Bluehm, gave him another of her brief, interested glances, but before he could respond she looked away.

'Ah, Egon,' his Aunt Ulyana said, sounding extremely Russian. 'How very kind of you to be with us.'

'Yes, aunt,' Rettmer said. If the experiment had failed, he would have been away for much longer, of course. That could have been explained away, if necessary. He made a production of finding a cheroot, tapping it on the packet, and fumbling for a light. Before he had finished, Piotr Vassilov was addressing him in heavily accented German.

'We were talking of the possibility of war, Herr Rettmer.'

Heidi said, unexpectedly: 'It was very depressing.' By her tone she referred to her guardian's conversation, not to the possibility of war.

Rettmer gazed at her for a moment, but she gave away nothing of her feelings.

'Surely, Herr Vassilov,' he said, 'surely, in these circles we may anticipate the war, prepare for its effects upon us, dread it . . . but should we discuss it in polite company? After all, we *are* neutral.'

'Neutral be damned!' Vassilov shouted, entirely missing the deliberate irony in Rettmer's words. 'I am not one of your polite coastal society! I have interests on both sides, and whatever happens I will lose. Anyway, I cannot believe that you are sitting here calmly, waiting for the N-D to burst in on your dinner party.' Russia, of course, was distant enough and large enough to remain genuinely neutral.

'It is not our war,' Rettmer said. 'Our leaders feel that the Masurians should leave.'

'They should not be here, I agree. But whose responsibility is it? The Free Territories further east make damned sure their neutrality is respected. They have the guns to keep their freedom!'

'You forget, Herr Vassilov—' Rettmer emphasized the foreign sound of the name— 'until a few weeks ago, Silte was a quiet, peaceful place, where no one had any territorial ambitions.'

'Silte is the weakest point on the coast,' Vassilov said.

Rettmer reached for the decanter and refilled the glass he had drained before leaving. His aunt's displeasure could be deduced from the fact that she had not allowed the servant to refill it in his absence.

He drank, deliberately keeping his gaze away from Vassilov, encouraging the man to take his arguments elsewhere. On Vassilov's previous visit to Silte, six weeks before, the Russian had hinted that he could supply certain high-technology luxury goods, should Rettmer have a market for them. Rettmer had made his disapproval very clear, conveying that he knew any such goods were probably smuggled. Now, at the dinner-table, Rettmer employed the same expression of frozen disapproval that he had used previously. Again the hint was taken. Within a few moments Vassilov had redirected his attention to Aunt Ulyana. She, deftly, introduced a subject of great local interest: the formation of a new orchestra in Silte, a project which required much financial backing. Piotr Vassilov, industrialist and amateur musician, was ideal for her purposes.

Rettmer settled back in his chair, half listening to the inevitable process by which Vassilov would be relieved of some fraction of his fortune, and he studied the girl.

Eyes downcast, she was toying desultorily with the pieces of cutlery by her place. It was impossible for him to gauge her thoughts. Her face now seemed less prominently thin than Rettmer had thought earlier in the meal; he saw unexpected warmth of character in her firm chin and high cheekbones. He was returning to his initial opinion, that he found her definitely attractive.

Now he was conscious of something else: a quick, subtle look from her. She was aware of his regard.

His aunt and Vassilov were speaking quickly, involved in their own schemes. Rettmer slid his chair back a short way, shifting it so he faced the girl.

He said: 'Heidi, I'm sure this talk does not interest you.'

'Does it interest you?'

She had not looked up. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the linen tablecloth. 'No, of course not. But since we are excluded from their Russian conversation, let us at least speak to each other. Tell me who you are.'

For a moment she seemed puzzled. There was a light frown on her forehead, as if she was seeking some explanatory clue from him. Then she smiled with a forced brightness, and glanced quickly towards Vassilov, as if signalling to Rettmer that she had to be cautious.

'There is little to tell about me, Herr Rettmer.'

'But by your name, you are not Russian?'

'No . . . I belong to the Free Territories, not to Piotr. He is merely my guardian.'

'You travel with him?'

'Everywhere . . . but only when he is in the Territories. I do not go to Russia with him.'

Time passed, and both Rettmer and Heidi drank more. It was almost as if their relationship had undergone a subtle change since his return from the island. Heidi revealed herself as talkative and intelligent. Throughout her conversation there remained the intriguing sense of duality: although she was being forthcoming, underneath there was always a hint that she was playing a rôle. Yet, Rettmer felt himself beginning to relax with her, enjoying her company, liking the puzzles in her. One of the minor preoccupations in his life was his aunt's concern to see him married to a suitable young lady. As a consequence, an apparently endless stream of distant relatives, friends and acquaintances came to Kurischen, almost all of them accompanied by available young women. Rettmer had long ago got used to this; marriage was not in his scheme of things for the future, and he had soon developed a suitable number of stratagems for avoiding the subject. He had, on a few occasions, taken advantage of these introductions for brief sexual affairs, but, being unwilling to draw attention to himself, he did not indulge in this too much.

Heidi was slightly different, though. There appeared to be more to her than he was able to see. He liked her laugh, her sudden moments of shyness, and he was growing curious about

her slight figure, inside the thin fabric of her dress. She was facing him now, leaning towards him. Rettmer knew that without forcing matters he could spend the night with her.

He began to think ahead. Listening for a moment to his aunt, Rettmer recognized the tone of her voice. Soon, she would suggest that they all retire to the music-room; this was traditional at Kurischen.

He asked Heidi: 'Are you a musician?'

'I play the piano a little. Mostly I accompany Piotr, now. He loves his violin and his nostalgic songs.'

So, she would not object too strongly if he should take her somewhere else for a while. Suddenly there came to him a most pleasing solution to his preoccupations. If he were to escape to the island, for the duration of the N-D invasion of Silte, the days of waiting alone would be long and dreary. But, if he were to have company. . . .

No, it was the wine thinking for him. In no way could he persuade this girl, an acquaintance of a mere few hours, to run away from her guardian and live with a virtual stranger on a lonely island for several days.

All the same, her company was very desirable.

He said, in a low voice: 'Heidi, when we adjourn to the music-room, I suggest that you and I take a stroll around the grounds instead.'

'Don't you wish to hear me play?'

'Later, perhaps.'

'Egon!' Evidently his aunt had overheard. 'You aren't proposing to leave us again?'

'We both need some fresh air, aunt. We'll join you and Herr Vassilov in half an hour.'

Vassilov looked dark, but Aunt Ulyana laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

'Let the young people take their walk, Piotr. It is very smoky in here.' She looked first at Vassilov, then at Rettmer. 'We may as well go through to the music-room now.'

An unmistakable expression came Rettmer's way: a look of encouragement. His aunt considered Heidi to be a suitable young lady, obviously.

Vassilov had remained silent and thoughtful. He nodded abruptly. 'Very well. It will be my pleasure.'

He stood up stiffly, extending his arm to Ulyana. She smiled at Rettmer and Heidi, then slipped her fingers around the Russian's forearm, and they walked slowly away to the adjacent music-room.

Rettmer and Heidi stood up, and together they went out into the hall.

The moment they were alone, Rettmer saw a magical transformation come over the girl. She seemed to bubble with a strangely nervous excitement. 'At last it's over! Was that what you wanted?'

'Yes, of course.'

'When you slipped away, after dinner, I thought you wanted to change our plan. Why didn't you say you would be leaving?'

'*Our* plan?' Rettmer wondered if he had misheard her.

'Yes, you know, this morning. . . .'

Trying to think quickly, trying to understand, Rettmer said: 'No, I changed nothing. I just had to go down to the harbour. A business matter.'

'There's no problem with the boat? It will be ready, won't it?'

For a moment he feared that she was referring to the field-sensor, impossible though the idea was. Warily he said, 'You need not worry. How much do you know about the boat?'

'Only what you told me. This morning!'

He looked closely at her, and saw in her eyes the same degree of confusion he himself was feeling. Decisively, he took her hand in his.

'Not here, Heidi. The others, or the servants, might overhear. Let's talk about this outside.'

'All right.'

He led her quickly down the side corridor, and outside to the path. The door was half-open behind them, the light spilling out over the flowers and shrubs. Night-time scents wafted around them.

'Now, tell me what happened this morning.'

'You don't remember?' The light from the doorway was on her face, and her eyes were sparkling. She was concerned, but not angry; a darting smile flashed at him.

Responding to her smile, not to her question, Rettmer said: 'Remind me.'

'I hoped you'd say that.'

Heidi stepped forward, slipping her hand behind Rettmer's head and pulling his face down to hers. She kissed him with barely suppressed violence, her tongue flicking against his through parted lips. As he raised his hand, she took it in hers and pressed it against her breast; he felt the soft curve, the button nipple, through the clinging fabric of her dress. She was making a deep noise in her throat, and her body moved sensuously in his arms.

When the kiss broke, Rettmer pressed her face against the side of his, and stared down at the ground behind her, trying to understand.

What had happened this morning? He had spent the day in the harbour office as usual; he had neither seen Heidi nor spoken to her. The first time he had ever seen her, ever realized that she existed, was when she arrived with Vassilov that evening. Yet she spoke, and acted, as if they knew each other well, as if they were lovers.

It partly accounted for her enigmatic behaviour over dinner . . . but what had they planned, and how did she know about his boat?

She was behaving towards him, literally, as if he had been in two places at once . . . as if, this morning, he had met her and told her of the escape plans he had only half started to form a few minutes ago!

Unless time could indeed be reversed, unless he had *already* used the time-zone to escape. It was a fantastic idea; but, knowing the properties of the field-sensor, it was logical.

He drew back from her, holding her in his arms and looking down into her face. In the light from the doorway her eyes were large, her lips slightly parted still. He said, taking a chance on a destiny that he might or might not already have created: 'Are you ready to leave?'

'You know I am,' she said, and squeezed him affectionately. 'I brought a case. It's under a bush, there behind you, as you told me.'

'What's in it?'

'The clothes you wanted me to bring.'

He held her to him again, with his face beside hers. He had to think, could not now betray that everything she knew had so far never happened. If he spoke any more, or if he looked at her

again, he knew he would give himself away.

They were already lovers. At least, in Heidi's experience of the day, they were already lovers. The assignation had been made, was now being kept. So he must have jumped back in time, somehow, even though he knew he had not.

Not yet.

Now he had to choose his future, to accept the pattern of time just as he had accepted the N-D offer all those years ago.

He had to do it.

Through the night air came the sound of a piano. A strong male voice took up the melody.

In his arms, Heidi murmured, 'Egon, shouldn't we leave? I don't want Piotr to find me with you.'

'Of course.' Rettmer kissed her quickly, then stood away from her. 'Tell me something first, Heidi. This morning . . . why did you let me seduce you?'

To his relief she gave a laugh. 'You know very well!'

'No. I'm not really sure.'

'Because of Piotr! You were being so inquisitive, so jealous of someone you hardly knew! In that café in Tekkenstrasse, when we had barely spoken to each other, you were behaving as if you possessed me!'

'And that made you wish to sleep with me?'

'No, of course not. But it made me interested in you. And you know the rest.'

Rettmer smiled as if he did know, then released her hand.

'I merely wanted to be sure. It happened so quickly. Now, Heidi, I must make sure there's no one outside the grounds. Will you wait for me here?'

'How long will you be?'

'I'm not sure,' Rettmer said. 'Maybe just a minute or two, maybe a little longer. I'll be as quick as I can.'

'I'll wait inside.' She looked towards the doorway.

'Good. Don't let Ulyana or Vassilov see you. I'll be back as soon as possible.'

He kissed her again, swiftly, then hurried down through the grounds.

Somewhere, hidden among the bushes, he thought he saw a familiar, white-suited figure.

The lamps were dim over the breakwater. The Masurian guard eyed him suspiciously as he carried a jerrican supposedly of petrol—but in fact empty—towards his boat.

'What's that?'

'Just petrol,' Rettmer said. 'It took me long enough to find some.'

In fact, he had snatched the can from a waste dump on his way down.

The soldier said nothing, and the suspicious regard continued. Rettmer paused briefly, but no other question came. He went on down the steps.

Within minutes he was heading out across the dark waters, towards the island.

He lay on the coarse grass of the hillock once more, under a brilliant sunset. A few gulls, possibly the same ones that he had seen before, circled around. He experienced an instinctive temptation to hurry, to get away from this island and return to Heidi. But if time was to reverse he would have to wait, and let the hours pass uneventfully in the time-zone.

And afterwards? He had the means of escape; the field-sensor could take him in and out of the time-zone at will. If he came again to the island, he could be safely away from Silte until all the upheavals of the N-D invasion were over. Kurischen, his home of the last few years, would be destroyed by then, but surely he would find somewhere else to live. His aunt might survive, or she might not; in the latter eventuality, her remaining wealth would come to him . . .

It was very relaxing to lie here and be able to postpone all these matters for a few hours. The scent of juniper around him was reminiscent of his boyhood, of the long hours spent gathering firewood on the heath.

Soon he dozed off, but he awoke intermittently, too cautious of overstaying in the time-zone to sleep well. In confused dreams he saw ghostly warships gliding past, and imagined Heidi's warmth beside him. All he had to do was wait.

The dense morning fog lay over Silte and its harbour as he returned. Dawn had broken an hour or two before, and the daytime bustle of the harbour had not yet started in earnest. From

the disposition of the vessels along the quay, he confirmed that he was returning on the morning of the same day, some hours before he would meet Heidi.

Rettmer did not steer his normal course around the breakwater, but instead made for a berth outside the harbour wall. Throughout the day which he remembered there had been only one boat at his usual mooring, not two, and any contradiction of the known past might be dangerous. He would need the field-sensor again, and it was best left hidden on his boat until he could move it safely, after dark.

Leaving the harbour proper, he walked through the fog to a boat-yard and arranged to hire a small cabin-cruiser, to be fuelled and provisioned ready for him by the evening. The fee was too high; Rettmer would have paid it willingly today, but to avoid suspicion he had to submit to the usual niceties of bargaining. Nearly half an hour passed before he could sign the contract. He asked that the craft should be sent to the breakwater when ready, to await him there.

It was strange to realize that a short distance away his other self, his earlier self, was beginning his normal morning's work in the harbour office. That earlier self would have no opportunity of meeting Heidi Bluehm.

The fog which had concealed him earlier was lifting gradually as Rettmer reached Tekkenstrasse. The narrow lane was winding and cobbled, with numerous small shops, galleries and studios in its old buildings. He discovered three cafés open in the street, and made sure at each one that Heidi was not yet there.

From the distance he heard the regular, mournful sound of the foghorn. Rettmer began dawdling along the lane, watching for Heidi, waiting as the number of shoppers slowly increased. One moment she was not there; the next moment, she was. Her sudden appearance delighted him. He had read the time-pattern correctly, and he was reshaping the day to suit himself. Heidi was coming nearer. He gazed at her openly, wanting her—needing her—to notice him. Her grey coat was buttoned high at the neck, demurely, and she wore a matching grey bonnet.

In daylight, she did seem very young.

He saw her glance at him briefly, then look away as she continued walking in his direction. At once Rettmer turned to walk

before her, keeping a good space ahead. Clearly she had noticed him; once he caught her staring directly at him.

He paused by a shop window, pretending to look inside. Heidi passed him. After a moment, he followed.

Heidi entered a café two doors further along. With his old caution Rettmer hesitated, until he was sure that no one else was with her. Then he went inside.

She was sitting alone at a corner table; the rest of the little café was empty, apart from the proprietress half-hidden behind the counter. Rettmer sat down at the table nearest to Heidi, and gave the wine-list a perfunctory examination. He looked up to see Heidi removing her gloves slowly, frowning at the list before her.

The proprietress came out, and went to Heidi.

'Do you have the Wenceslaus?' Heidi asked, in a low voice.

'Certainly, madame.' The woman turned to Rettmer. 'And your order, sir?'

'I'll have the same, please.' He smiled. The proprietress moved away with a quizzical expression.

Heidi was looking at him with undisguised curiosity. 'Why did you follow me?'

'Forgive me,' Rettmer said quickly. 'My name is Egon Rettmer, and I believe yours is Heidi Bluehm.' She nodded, suddenly very calm. Rettmer continued with his reassurances, saying that his aunt had described her to him. 'You know, of course, that you and Piotr Vassilov will be our dinner-guests this evening.'

Heidi said: 'The dinner invitation, yes. But I have never met your aunt. How could she describe me?'

Rettmer shrugged. 'I imagine she questioned your guardian fairly thoroughly. Our Russian relatives love their talk.'

'That is true,' Heidi said.

The woman returned with their drinks. She gave Rettmer a resigned look, and placed both glasses on Heidi's table. Such meetings between strangers were familiar events here. Nodding, Rettmer moved across to share the table.

'You don't mind. . . ?'

'Yes, I do,' Heidi said. 'But clearly you do not, so I shall not insist on my own preference.'

Rettmer raised his glass to her. 'You are very frank, Fräulein Bluehm.'

'I am not usually polite.'

'You know that my aunt prefers a polite dinner-table?'

'So Piotr has warned me. I am not in the habit of spilling my soup or throwing crockery at the walls. I simply speak my mind.'

'Good.'

Rettmer was looking at her face, noting that her mood had the strange ability to determine her appearance somehow. When he had last seen her, in the night that was to come, her manner had been more soft and affectionate, and her features had seemed proportionately more attractive. Now she was on her guard, and her face had taken on an inner hardness. She was fascinating to watch.

'I have met Piotr Vassilov before,' Rettmer said. 'He did not mention you then.'

'Should he have?'

'They were business meetings, true. All the same, if you were my . . . companion, I should be proud to speak of you.'

'Piotr is my guardian,' she said. 'When he is in the Territories he expects me to travel with him.'

Then a memory came to Rettmer: in the night, Heidi would say that he had appeared strangely jealous of Piotr Vassilov. Now Rettmer understood. The thought of this young woman with Vassilov raised sexual images in his mind, and disquieted him.

He said: 'I see.'

Heidi regarded him with a sharp expression. 'In case you wonder, Herr Rettmer, the reason you and I have not met before is that until earlier this year I was at the conservatoire. My studies are now complete. Because of the war . . . well, Piotr thinks it safer that we should not separate for the time being.'

'So he guards you.'

'He is very protective. Only when I was at the conservatoire could I lead a normal life. Even then, he—'

Rettmer waited, but she left the thought unfinished, and looked away from him.

'Herr Rettmer, do you know I have been in the Free Territories for over a month? And in that time I have not spoken to anyone that Piotr has not first approved from his circle of friends? You are the first person of my own age I have met since I left the conservatoire!'

'He controls your life, then.'

'Absolutely!'

'Does he . . . Do you allow him to. . . ?'

She smiled then, a calculating smile. 'You phrase it so politely, Herr Rettmer. If you mean, do I sleep with him? The answer . . . No, I am not telling you everything. Make your own judgment.'

And with a quick, surprising movement, she drained her glass of the rich liqueur.

Rettmer was slightly unnerved by her manner. He had fantasized that she might be eager for his advances, and, more soberly, had considered how best to win her over, but certainly he had never expected to find her so forthright and strongminded, albeit immature. Perhaps her flaunted impoliteness was a gesture of independence from her over-protected background? He was unsure. She was not, actually, as attractive as she had seemed during the dinner-party and after . . . but clearly she was the same young woman; clues to her personality were always visible.

Even so, she continued to excite him. She had said that they made love during the day; it was destined. And later, in the evening, he would take her to the island.

He said: 'You know that an invasion of the Territories is inevitable?'

'I have heard the rumours,' she said.

'We have all heard them. Suppose, for example, that Silte Town is to be attacked by the N-D tomorrow morning? What then?'

'They are nowhere near Silte, surely. And why should they attack neutrals?'

'Because of the Masurian presence. Of course the Masurians will fight to hold Silte, and there will be many deaths.'

'Piotr and I would flee.'

'So you would still be with him.'

She lowered her eyes again.

Rettmer said: 'Heidi, I know we have only just met, but I have a proposition for you. I am going to leave Silte, to go somewhere safe until all the trouble dies down. Why don't you come with me?'

He saw the fierce independence flare in her expression, but her tone was controlled as she replied: 'I could not get away from Piotr.'

'Could not? Or will not?'

She said nothing, looking at the faint trace of the liqueur in the bottom of her glass.

'If I knew a way,' she said at last, very quietly. 'If I was sure, then I could.'

Rettmer swallowed the remainder of his drink, over-hastily, and stood up. He left a currency note under his glass for the proprietress.

Heidi asked: 'Where are you going?'

'We'll go for a walk,' he said. 'With Masurian ears everywhere, it is safest to keep moving.'

He held the door open for her, and as she passed through he managed to glance at his watch.

Twelve hours to go.

An hour later, Rettmer and Heidi were walking in the open countryside that surrounded the town. The fog had long since cleared, and from the low hills they could see the clean, blue sweep of the sea. Over to the north-west, Rettmer fancied that he could perceive a faint, tiny dot: the island.

As they walked among the fields, Rettmer had much to explain: the cabin-cruiser, how they would reach it, where they would go. There was also much that he did not explain, about the time-zone and the events of the night. She would have to treat him as a complete stranger at the coming dinner-party. 'After the meal, I will ask you to remind me of this morning. Then it will be safe to speak.' He advised her to prepare a small case of clothes for their stay.

'It will be for several days, maybe more,' he said. 'Could you suffer my company for that time?'

She was holding his hand, and now she tightened her grip slightly.

'It depends,' she said.

Rettmer found a crude hay barn in one of the fields, and they stole inside. They lay down. Heidi loosened her coat, and lay closely against him.

She whispered, urgently: 'I must be free of him, Egon!'

Rettmer's hands slid across her breasts, finding the front of her dress, plucking it open. She used him as he was using her, and the arrangement seemed satisfying to both.

Five hours to go.

In the late afternoon Rettmer strolled along to the breakwater. He discovered that his cabin-cruiser was already prepared and waiting; it lacked only the field-sensor. Now would be the ideal time to transfer the apparatus, except that he could not carry the field-sensor from his boat on the outer wall unobserved. At least one Masurian soldier was always nearby. Later, in darkness, his action would be quite safe. Heidi could keep a look-out, and warn him of any approaching guards.

He now had time to spare, so he went to a restaurant and bought a meal; he had eaten only once before today, with Heidi in the town. He borrowed a razor from the owner of the restaurant, and in the washroom he made himself presentable.

After nightfall, he made his way to Kurischen.

He was concealed in the thick shrubbery of the grounds when Vassilov and Heidi arrived for the dinner-party; an hour later, he watched as the earlier version of himself set off for the first trip to the island. After a few minutes, he saw himself return. All these events were as he remembered them.

Now came the longest period of waiting, or so it seemed: the time when he and Heidi were inside the house, talking after the meal. It had felt then as if they had spoken for only a short time, but while he waited outside, Rettmer found the minutes dragging interminably.

At last, the side-door opened, and he and Heidi emerged. Almost at once, it seemed, they went into each other's arms, kissing and embracing. Watching in the manner of a voyeur, Rettmer experienced a sensation of acute jealousy, as if Heidi were with some other man. From inside the house there drifted piano music, and Vassilov's baritone, singing in Russian of lost love and an ancient homeland. Strange, irrational emotions coursed through Rettmer as he watched the couple in the doorway.

He could not step forward yet; he dared not look into the eyes of his other self.

Suddenly the two before him parted: Heidi returning to the house, and the other Rettmer walking away swiftly through the grounds.

Rettmer waited until he was sure he was alone, then went

quickly across to the door and opened it. Heidi should be waiting for him inside.

She was not there.

Rettmer came to a halt in the brightly lit corridor, confused but alert. Definitely, he remembered asking her to wait.

Suddenly, Vassilov's song was silenced. At once, Rettmer knew where Heidi had gone.

He burst into the music-room. His aunt was sitting at the keyboard; Vassilov and Heidi were standing a little way from her. They were in each other's arms, as a moment ago she had been in his.

'Heidi!' Rettmer called out involuntarily.

Rising from her stool, his aunt looked as though both Heidi's behaviour and his sudden arrival were of the acutest embarrassment to her. 'Egon, dear, perhaps you and I should retire.'

'No, Aunt Ulyana. Please stay here. Heidi, what are you doing?'

The girl detached herself from Vassilov's arms. Without saying anything, she gave the Russian an affectionate squeeze, then kissed him again, full on the lips. Slowly she moved away.

'Come on, Heidi,' Rettmer was saying. 'Do you still want to go through with this?'

'Yes,' Heidi whispered.

Vassilov said: 'Fräulein Bluehm is legally within my protection. What have you two been planning together?'

Heidi eluded her guardian's hand, stumbling across to Rettmer. He caught her arm and propelled her quickly out to the hall.

'Heidi? You haven't changed your mind?'

'No. But I had to say goodbye. He . . . he's tried to be good to me . . .'

Vassilov was shouting: 'I shall call the Masurian Guard! Ulyana, where is your telephone?'

Rettmer remembered to snatch up Heidi's case as they ran out into the night.

Their dash down to the breakwater was a nightmare. Rettmer struggled to hurry Heidi along despite her tight, restricting gown; her large suitcase of clothing slowed him down and banged painfully against his legs as he tried to run. At last he

guided her under the fence and past the harbour buildings. He tried to calm his gasping breath. The breakwater beyond was exactly as he had seen it twice before that night: over the harbour wall hung a cold, yellow-lit silence. Now the mist was beginning to creep in, snaking among the moored boats.

The guard from the breakwater was ahead; he had moved down from his previous position and was standing, legs astride, blocking their way. His gun, however, was still in its holster.

'If we don't provoke anything,' Rettmer said softly, to Heidi, 'we should be all right.' One hand on her arm, the other holding her case, he walked forward.

She whispered: 'Piotr must have raised the alarm!'

'Just stay calm. Trust me.'

They were very close to the Masurian soldier. Suddenly, Rettmer heard a vehicle siren starting up in the town. He had the presence of mind to not look back, for such sounds had become common lately.

'You again,' the guard said, standing in their path, nodding as he studied Rettmer and Heidi.

'Yes,' Rettmer said curtly. He moved to walk on.

'Not so fast. Where do you think you're going?'

'Just a fishing trip.'

'Again? Not this time. You stay here.'

'What a *shame*,' Heidi said, to the guard. 'I was *so* looking forward to it, soldier. Couldn't you possibly see your way to. . . ?'

The guard had started drawing his gun, but under Heidi's pleading he hesitated. Rettmer knew he had to act now or be trapped; that distant siren noise might not be a coincidence.

Heidi's case, swung by Rettmer, caught the guard squarely in the midriff. The gun went off as the Masurian doubled up, and shattered concrete spurted up from the floor. Fragments peppered Rettmer's clothes. Rettmer kicked wildly at the falling man; somehow the gun clattered away and disappeared over the edge.

Behind him a car engine roared into life. More guards—alerted by the gunfire? He would never reach the cabin-cruiser now, never have time to transfer the field-sensor.

'Run, Heidi! Across to the outer wall!'

He grabbed her arm again, and almost threw her down the steps towards his original boat. The pursuing car was acceler-

ating towards them, its headlights full on.

He fell clumsily with her into his outboard-motor boat, still clutching her suitcase. 'Get the engine going!'

'How?'

Swearing, Rettmer worked the mooring-rope free, and whirled around to tug on the pull-start mechanism; on the third pull of the cord the motor caught. The boat rocked against the wall.

'Keep down!' he shouted. Under the lights he could see uniformed Masurians, leaping from the car above him. He dived at the wheel, and, crouching low, sent the boat curving away from the harbour.

Two shots were fired; water spurted around them. Heidi was shaking, and Rettmer could hear her breath over the sound of the engine, so loud were her gasps of fear.

Then they were safely away into the darkness, leaving the Masurians behind.

He saw that Heidi was still down on the boards, clinging to the gunwales as the little boat encountered the waves of the open sea.

'Are you hurt?' he called.

'No.' She crawled forward until she was beside him. 'You didn't tell me about this boat.' Slowly she pulled herself upright. 'They fired at us! That guard you knocked down . . . was he injured?'

'Only bruised and winded, I should think. I had to do it. He would have stopped us.'

'You fool,' Heidi said. 'I could have talked him into letting us pass!'

Rettmer shrugged. 'We are here. And, Heidi, the means of our escape is still aboard this boat.'

He reached under the panel and turned the switch; the red pilot-light of the field-sensor glowed dimly.

Heidi was watching him. 'Are you signalling to someone?'

'Not exactly,' Rettmer said.

Behind them, another engine sounded. Rettmer looked back. A large police-launch had left the harbour, and was racing after them.

'Get down again, Heidi!' Rettmer shouted, and the girl complied at once. He too kept his head low.

Rettmer glanced at the fuel-gauge: just enough to reach the time-zone, if only he could outrun the police-launch. But of

course it could easily overhaul his little craft.

Shots came, irregularly, but he heard no impacts. Obviously the enemy were shooting wide of him deliberately, intending not to kill but to intimidate. Any hit would be an accident, caused by the rolling of the launch upsetting someone's aim.

Within minutes the police-launch had halved the distance between them. A good marksman could certainly shoot him now, if necessary, but Rettmer hoped that to the Masurians he would be more important alive. Every N-D agent was important.

'Your Vassilov!' he shouted to Heidi over the noise. 'Does he work for the Masurians?'

'He works for whoever pays.'

'Does he know about me?'

'Does he know *what* about you?'

Rettmer made no answer. It was all too obvious that the guard, the car and the launch were all part of the same elaborate trap. With some bitterness he recalled certain of Vassilov's casual inquiries in the past, inquiries which suddenly fitted into a sinister pattern. Presumably Heidi had much to learn of her guardian's activities, if guardian he was.

From behind, a loud-hailer screeched at them to halt, but Rettmer kept going. He ignored the fuel-gauge, now reading low. The field-sensor would bring him through; it would, it had to. Now he could hear the deep roar of the launch's engine, very close at hand, its noise accompanied by a broad, splashing hiss from the churned-up sea.

The launch was abreast of them.

Then, to his immense relief, the sky flickered.

Around him there appeared hot daylight on a calm, blue-green sea. Rettmer saw Heidi blinking; he laughed aloud. The police-launch, lacking a field-sensor, had vanished.

Ahead, seagulls swooped and soared over the island.

He had to explain something of the time-zone to Heidi, of course. She seemed to understand. The information left her very quiet, withdrawn somehow, looking with expressionless eyes at the island as Rettmer brought the boat in.

Because this visit was so highly unofficial, he intended to moor among the rocks again, hidden from the cruiser. He brought his craft into the shallows; the fuel-tank was almost empty. But he was not the first in this place, it seemed. Already bobbing at

anchor was another boat, identical to his.

Precisely identical.

It was empty. Rettmer realized that it was his own boat, brought here earlier while he waited for time to reverse. This was the time of his previous visit. Somewhere, up on the hillside, his earlier self would be sleeping.

He glanced up at the sun; there would be about an hour to sunset. He remembered that when he had arrived before, an hour or so had elapsed before nightfall, he had found his hiding-place quickly, and he had stayed there the whole time.

He had seen no one; he had been alone.

But if that earlier Rettmer should see him now . . .

Heidi noticed his confusion. She asked: 'What is wrong?'

'Nothing.' He pointed towards the other boat. 'Only . . . there's someone here. We must not disturb him.'

'You said we would be alone.'

'I'll explain presently. Only you and I will be here.'

Her appearance, or else his perception of her appearance, had changed. In the bright sunlight her face lacked its previous animation, seeming pinched and humourless. Her body, still confined within the clinging evening gown, had let its svelte bearing give way to an angular lack of poise. The escape must have shaken her. He sighed; she was too young for this affair, too unprepared.

Rettmer threw in the sea-anchor as well as his landing-iron. He would have to wade through shallow water to reach the shore; either that, or tie up near that other boat . . . which he could not bring himself to do.

He took the suitcase. 'Nothing breakable? Good.' With some effort he threw it over to the dry rocks. Next he removed his shoes and socks, and rolled up his trousers.

He asked Heidi: 'Do you want me to carry you?'

'No, I can manage.'

Much to his surprise, Heidi stood up in the boat and slipped out of her gown. She rolled it up along its length, and tossed it across to land loosely beside her suitcase. Barefoot, wearing only a thin slip, she stepped over the side and waded ashore. On her upper back he noticed a number of faint weals, where he had scratched her as they made love.

By the time he had reached the rocks beside her, Heidi had put

on a thick woollen pullover and trousers. Rettmer, mopping at his feet and legs, was much worse prepared for a night on the island.

Heidi was looking from one boat to the other. Finally she said: 'This is very strange. Who else is here?'

'I am,' Rettmer said.

As she frowned, he went on: 'An earlier version of myself. I came here some time ago . . . partly to be able to meet you.'

He revealed to her his discovery of time reversal, and how it had enabled him to arrange this escape.

'I see. This thing you call the field-sensor: it was in this boat, not on your cabin-cruiser. Where did you obtain it?'

'Heidi, you can guess, I'm sure. Now you understand why I needed to escape.'

'I don't understand why you wanted me with you, knowing your suspicions of Piotr.'

He spread his hands, preferring to answer obliquely. 'Suspicions? No, I had no reason to suspect Piotr of anything, until I walked into that trap at the harbour. For you, Heidi . . . I thought that you would welcome this refuge. Have you looked back at Silte, here?'

'No.' Heidi stood up, shading her hands with her eyes. Now, he noted, she had recovered much of her earlier self-confidence. At first she seemed to see nothing wrong with the coast before her, but then some detail must have caught her attention. She stared.

'Oh!' She moved back from him, and started to scramble up the sandy hillside.

'Heidi! Be careful! Don't let yourself be seen!'

'I must see Silte fully! I can't believe it!'

She was hurrying upwards, kicking sand from the grass tufts in her haste.

'Heidi!'

Only a short distance above here, hidden by the juniper, was his previous resting place. Sudden fear drove him after her.

When he caught her up, she was standing quite still. She was not looking towards Silte, but looking down.

Egon Rettmer lay beneath the juniper bush. His eyes were closed in sleep, and one hand was under his head as a makeshift pillow.

'So it was true,' Heidi said quietly. 'It really is you.'

'Heidi, come away.' He could not bear to stand so close to himself.

She turned to face him. 'Please, Egon, take me back to Silte.'

'I cannot,' he said. 'I'm out of fuel, Heidi. Besides, it is not safe. Come down to the beach, and I'll explain.'

'No. You have explanations for everything and answers for nothing. Tell me here. I shall stand on this spot until you tell me what is not safe.'

Recognizing her determination, he said: 'Please keep your voice down, and listen to me. My position is simple. If I am in Silte Town when the invasion begins—that invasion,' he said, waving an arm towards Silte, 'the Masurians will take me in for questioning. I happen to know that most of their internees will be shot.'

'Piotr would not let that happen.'

'He will have no sympathy for me.'

Rettmer stepped back, pleadingly, but she did not follow. She remained standing just two short paces from his sleeping self.

'Piotr is more important than you might think,' Heidi said. 'The military will listen to him. He had heard rumours of a new N-D weapon, and he came to Silte thinking that you were involved, somehow. I came with him . . . well, to help him.'

'So he is not your guardian.'

'No. But he is someone I love. Didn't you wonder why my guardian had allowed me out in the café, alone, unchaperoned? He was coming to meet me there, but he saw you with me first . . .'

There was nothing Rettmer could say.

The other Rettmer moved slightly, probably disturbed by their voices.

Under a familiar sunset, far behind Heidi, Rettmer could make out the superstructure of the N-D cruiser, moored in the deep water beyond the island. He would have been safer taking his chances with the Schutztruppe.

Heidi said: 'I want to go back to Silte. You'll be safe with Piotr; he might even recruit you, if you can help him.'

'You haven't understood.' Rettmer pointed down to his sleeping self. '*He* is going back to Silte. I am not.'

'So how long do we wait here?'

'Until the N-D see us!'

With a sudden spasm of fury he swung Heidi around, to face the masts and aerials of the cruiser. Even at this distance, the green flag of Nord-Deutschland was clearly visible.

'No!' she cried. 'I'm going back with *him*!'

And swiftly she knelt over the sleeping Rettmer, and shook him by the shoulder.

'Egon, wake up—'

'Stop!' He managed to pull her back, too late.

Egon Rettmer was awake.

His dreamlike gaze seemed to linger on Heidi, then travel slowly past her to rest upon Rettmer himself. His eyes came fully open.

Rettmer saw his own face, staring at himself.

Night fell.

At first, Rettmer thought that sunset of a natural kind had occurred, unusually swiftly, but he realized his error almost immediately. This was a transition to another night. Time had been abused, and time had reacted.

The sleeping Rettmer had vanished. So, also, had his boat.

He and Heidi huddled together for warmth all night; they had missed the summer, and the wind was cold. In the morning, when Rettmer climbed the hill to signal to the cruiser, he discovered that that too had gone.

Silte, lying across the placid sea, was shrouded in fog.

They heard the first guns an hour after dawn. Rettmer sat with Heidi, and listened to the unending series of explosions.

In due course the fog lifted; he saw that the bombardment was being carried on by a dozen major ships, pouring round after round into the undefended town. He remembered his half-asleep vision of warships passing the island, and he understood at last how the time-zone had served the invaders. Now the distant cacophony of the slaughter was a continuous thunder, and a pall of black smoke rose above Silte. In the hills around the town, woods and fields were burning as the first airplanes joined the assault.

During the afternoon, a number of craft put out from Silte Town; one of them might have been the launch that gave chase in the night. It was the Masurians' only sign of counter-attack;

all were sunk within a few minutes.

To this war, Rettmer and Heidi were both now irrelevant. In this knowledge they formed a kind of truce. They were without food.

'Your cabin-cruiser had food for a week, they told me,' Heidi said. 'I wish you had let me get us past that guard.'

'We would not be here now. Your friends would have seen me collect the field-sensor.' Rettmer sighed. 'You'd have called them. Why couldn't Vassilov have followed me himself?'

'He did want to, but it had to be me. It was logical.'

Rettmer went back to gazing at the ruin of Silte, where somewhere under the smoke Kurischen was burning.

It was Heidi who first pointed out the N-D cruiser, as it headed for the deeper waters beyond the island, where, after some delay, it put down anchor.

Rettmer went down to the little jetty, and stood on the wall, waving his arms to attract attention. Eventually, after various movements on deck, a launch was lowered into the sea and came towards them. Heidi stood beside him, taking his arm.

A second craft was approaching from the south.

Coming in, over the still waters, was a white-suited figure, standing at the wheel of a small motor-boat.

Rettmer saw his own face, staring at himself.

Night fell.

Robin Douglas

Flies in Amber

I was in the middle of reading through a pile of perhaps a dozen manuscripts of various standards, none of them high, when I came across this story; when I'd read it I thought to myself: '*That's* more like it.' However, cautious as ever, I thought that perhaps my liking for it might be due to no more than the contrast between it and the others, so I put it in the 'possibles' file and forgot about it. Or tried to. Three weeks later I found that, not only could I remember one or two of the sentences from the story word-perfect, I could also, merely by thinking of it, recapture in my mind the whole mood of the tale. In three weeks I read probably between a million and one and a half million words, so the survival capabilities of this story were, for me, obviously high. I hope you find the same.

'I promise it's all right. Please do come. There's something I want you to see.'

He was in no position to give offence, and so he rose at once and went after her, wondering as he did if she always acted like this, in a series of poses, each one calculated for effect, aiming at a feminine whimsicality which he found distasteful.

They walked down a richly mosaiced corridor. Delicate blue and white vases were set in niches in the walls, works of art collected by her father: priceless. The deep carpet embarrassed Werner: he distrusted the silence, the absence of clean, ringing footsteps, and he thought: 'All this luxury, shut up in here, never allowed out except with a sour-faced aunt for a chaperone, what kind of life is that?'

In his own interests, he worked at feeling sympathy for the girl.

And really, there was something pathetic in the way she walked, so conscious that it was a man who followed her. She kept looking back at him over her shoulder with exquisite smiles.

'I think you'll find it much nicer,' she said, 'waiting for Daddy

in the garden.'

'Oh, I'm sure I shall.'

—Saying 'shall', not 'will'. He noticed it, a mark of his own poverty, falling in with her game, striking a pose. But did he have a choice? If the daughter took a dislike to him, couldn't that prejudice the father? Widowers were often susceptible that way, even a fleet commander might be.

'It's very kind of you to show me round, Miss Jonson,' said Werner gallantly.

She rewarded him with a laugh that sounded prearranged, as if she were playing to an unseen audience who murmured 'Charming! Quite charming!' whenever they heard her.

Werner found it depressing. After all, she had no need to be a travesty. She could have been beautiful. Most of the attributes were there: a young, slim body, hair of deep chestnut falling in curls that might not have seemed so artful if they had been just a fraction less perfect; slender arms, and her face, when it looked round at him, a pale oval with astonishing grey eyes. Yes, she might have been the real thing, but for her knowledge of it.

It was a long corridor. After the vases came gemstones from the more inaccessible planets, each mounted on a plaque with a gold inscription, items of exceptional rarity. As he passed them, Werner fiddled with the cuff of one sleeve. So much wealth, it was almost indecent.

And on the theme of indecency . . . He watched the girl's dress cling and shift with the movement of her hips. It was crocus yellow, made of some flimsy, impractical stuff that looked like silk, and perhaps, regardless of the price, it *was* silk. Why not? That wasn't the point. The point was that this dress presented her, too, as a connoisseur's showpiece.

'Here we are, the garden.'

The door slid back. She stepped outside, tilting her face to the sun and closing her eyes ecstatically. She purred,

'I just love the sun! Isn't it wonderful? Wouldn't it be terrible to live on a world where there's no sun?'

She laughed to point up the childishness of her question, so that he was obliged to smile back and agree.

'Terrible.'

His indulgence pleased her. She waved her arms.

'Isn't it a beautiful garden? Don't you think so?'

Well, it almost was. Werner looked round with a fixed, pleased smile. In the distance he saw high walls, and everywhere there was such a screening of tall trees that the tower blocks of the city were blotted out and forgotten. A profusion of plants filled the foreground, nothing homely, all exotic specimens from places beyond the imagination, shipped home at an expense presumably of the same order. Most breathtaking of all was a row of shrubs, their leaves a deep copper colour, their flowers great sunbursts of cream petals glowing against the foliage.

Werner stared at these shrubs.

'Yes,' he said, 'excessively beautiful.'

The air smelt sweet with blossom. It palled the senses like too rich a liqueur. But the girl accepted his words as praise. Of course she would: she was used to no other kind of comment: and suddenly she had taken hold of his hand.

'Now, Mr Werner, I'm going to show you our greatest treasure. It's unlike anything you'll have ever seen, and hardly anyone knows *anything* about them . . . Oh, I do hope you don't!' she said. 'It really is supposed to be most dreadfully rare. I'll be so disappointed if you're not excited. . . .'

'I'll be just as excited as you want, Miss Jonson,' he said drily, 'though plants are not exactly my forte.'

'But this is not a plant.'

He allowed himself to be led. Her touch worried him; the skin of her palm felt too soft.

If the Captain comes out now, and sees me holding her hand, Werner agonized, will that count for me or against me? Will I be humouring an innocent young thing, or trespassing?

She led him through a veil of hanging vegetation, brilliant orange flowers that smelt of almond; and on the other side she towed him between spiky bushes covered in lavender cobwebs: a thin matting of lavender dust lay on the grass round about them. Nearby a fountain was playing. Werner listened to its well ordered little splashes, and longed for rescue.

The girl stopped.

'There!' she said, dropping her voice to an affected whisper, 'do just take a peep!'

They were standing in front of a cage. It had been mounted on a marble pedestal, and was shaped like a pagoda. He estimated its height at some five feet, and decided it might be made of

copper: it glowed with dull tenacity in the sunlight, and between the bars he could make out a crouched form, some living creature.

This was more than he had bargained for. The import tax on exotic pets was designed to be prohibitive: he had never heard of a private individual owning any. And yet, of course, this would be something exotic, something from a far-flung world where Man had no vocabulary for the commonest sights. Werner felt a deep reluctance to investigate this thing in the cage more closely. Perhaps the Captain had smuggled it in, by-passed the authorities. . . .

It could put a junior who was seeking promotion in an awkward spot, to discover something like that.

The girl was smiling prettily up at him as if she enjoyed his hesitation, and Werner was struck by another uncomfortable thought. What if this was some kind of initiative test?

Desperately he said, 'Don't you think we should ask your father first? I mean, strangers might upset it. You can never tell with animals. . . .'

'Oh, but it's not an animal!'

She shrieked with laughter, and clapped her hands; altogether a sickening display, decided Werner, who was agitated by his anxiety and disliked having to admire the haze which the sunlight made in her hair.

'I mean,' she went on, 'it's not an *animal* animal. Of course, it is an animal in the sense that you are and I am, but not in the other way. Poor old Gogo.'

He gazed at the caged form, a monkeylike thing, and his mind filled with a cold dawn.

'You mean it's intelligent.'

'Of course it is!' She feigned surprise at the question. 'Of course you are, my little Gogo, aren't you?' And she danced across to the cage, crouching to pout her lips at the creature through the bars. The thing kept perfectly still. Its back was to Werner but, so far as the man could tell, it made no response, though the girl continued for some time making kissing noises and chattering babytalk.

'And how's my little Gogo? Why don't you look at me? Why don't you say something? You funny old thing.' Then, breaking off to smile an invitation through the cage, she waved and cried,

'Oh do come over and look Mr Werner! *Please!*'

'Hell!' said Werner beneath his breath. He moved forward miserably. A caged creature that was intelligent? The idea disgusted him. But it also gave him the clue as to how Captain Jonson had afforded this treasure: an intelligent creature would not be classified as a pet, and so there would be no import tax.

Yet to keep it locked up like this. . . . Werner was genuinely shocked. And what would it be like, he asked himself, to serve under such a Captain, a man capable of such things? If he hadn't needed this posting . . .

He came to a stiff standstill by the girl's shoulder, and peered in through the bars.

'Daddy christened him Gogo,' the girl was saying, 'because he never moves. Well, hardly ever, do you Gogo?'

At this proximity, it resembled a naked child, perhaps some twenty months old, with an outrageously large head and an unfortunate disease of the eyes: the pupils were dilated; black moons fringed with scarlet.

Then Werner took in details: two arms, ending in a number of finger-like tubes that appeared to be open at the tips; legs folded under the body in a manner that indicated joints in two places; the skin pigmentation a mottled grey which contributed to the notion that this thing was very ancient and possibly blighted. And in contradiction to all this, an intense stillness about the creature's posture that suggested great reserves of strength, so that Werner had the uncanny impression that, if it had wanted, the alien could have stretched out its arms, prized the cage bars apart, and regained its freedom in a second. But surely that was nonsense. For an intelligent form of life to sit in a cage voluntarily . . . Werner couldn't believe it.

A neat cone of excrement lay at the creature's side, hardening on the cage floor.

Werner turned to the girl in anger. He was tired of her game.

'In God's name, what is it?' he asked harshly.

She moulded her face to appear wounded by his tone, just a little, though he suspected that in reality his reaction was no surprise to her.

'We don't have a name for the species exactly. He comes from a small planet my father visited once, and really, you know, Mr Werner,' she said gravely, 'you mustn't be misguided by the way

I speak to him. Gogo is very, very clever. He's probably reading your thoughts at this moment.'

'Telepathic? Does he communicate?'

'Oh, not with us!'

She gave a sad smile; how much sincerity lay in its sadness, Werner thought it best not to judge.

'Gogo's far too clever to communicate with us.'

'Too clever?'

'Daddy says our minds must be like the buzzing of flies in the distance. Not worth bothering about. You see, we've hardly got minds at all compared with Gogo. I was only joking when I said he might read your thoughts. Gogo wouldn't bother. Our thoughts are too small.'

She cocked her head on one side, sparrow fashion, to watch Werner digest this information, but her pose was lost on him. He studied the alien, its mottled face, the skin puckered into minute folds that all but smothered the mouth, its nose shrunken to a point near non-existence, its red-rimmed eyes, enormous, filled with a magnificent oblivion.

'He doesn't mind being here. They're too damn' clever to care where they are,' said a male voice at Werner's back. The girl sprang up and ran forwards with obvious pleasure.

'Daddy.'

Werner twisted where he stood to see her throw her arms round the neck of a man about fifty years old, lean, with Scandinavian good looks, cold eyes.

'Captain Jonson, sir . . .'

He gave a nervous salute.

The older man stroked his daughter's hair fondly, and smiled over her head at the candidate.

'Werner. You came early. I like that.'

He ran a hand down his daughter's back, lingering on the curve of her hip, and told her, 'I have to take your guest away now, Erika. We have business to talk.'

'Such a nice man, Daddy. I hope he gets the post.'

'You hoped that about the last one, my dear.'

'They're all so nice.'

'Say goodbye to him.'

She came forward, and she was glowing. Werner was struck by the change in her: there was an immediacy to her movements

that had been totally absent before her father came.

'Goodbye Mr Werner. I hope you'll—do well,' she said.

He blushed as he shook hands. 'Goodbye Miss Jonson, and thank you for, uh, showing me your friend here.'

'Yes,' her tone surprised him, 'he is my friend, my Gogo.' And she went back to sit on the grass beside the cage.

'Don't stay in the sun too long, Erika.'

'I won't, Daddy.'

Werner followed the Captain back through the garden. As when he had been with the daughter, he found it natural, implicit in the rules, to walk a couple of paces behind his guide. The fountain tinkled. Apart from that, the garden was silent. Its alien flora seemed not to attract bird or insect life.

Once again Werner found that the silence embarrassed him, and this time it seemed to demand an offering. He said falsely, 'Your daughter is a very lovely young lady, Captain.'

Jonson did not turn back. He led the way past the cobwebbed trees, and observed, 'Naturally her father thinks so.' Then he added, 'I hope you didn't mind coming here for your interview, Werner. Since her mother died in '69, any time I have actually on the planet, I spend as much of it as I can with Erika. I'm sure you understand. It's difficult for a man in my position to fulfil the duties of a parent.'

'Oh, of course. It's an honour to come to your home, sir.'

Werner despised his own words. Such kow-towing. And wouldn't the Captain despise him for it? But the truth was, that mention of '69 had thrown Werner. If the girl's mother had died in '69, Erika had to be at least twenty-seven years old. The thought was gruesome; and before he could steady himself, he had indulged in a second piece of flattery.

'I'm sure she has all that a father could give her, sir.'

'She's exposed to nothing but the best, if that's what you mean,' replied Jonson, as if Werner had made a criticism.

The lieutenant became mute. They passed through the screen of orange flowers, and the fountain-play grew softer in the distance. Here, outside the house, Jonson turned back to survey his garden admiringly, much as his daughter had done.

'I make sure she's protected from the seamier side of life. You know what I mean, Werner, eh?'

'Yes sir!'

Alarmed by this probe into his morals, the younger man yelped a response like a puppy. He sweated under Jonson's eyes. Soon there came another question.

'And what did you think of Gogo?'

Werner tried to rally, show some spirit.

'I was going to ask about that, sir . . .'

'He amuses her,' interrupted the Captain. 'A pet. You must appreciate, Werner, he's not a prisoner. The mind of his species took a wrong turn. It grew too fast. Their physical whereabouts have become irrelevant. You, me, this world, the next planet—it's all the same to that shrivelled thing in the cage. We're all inside his head, you understand.'

He paused before explaining: 'I shipped out the team sent to document the species before it becomes extinct—which must happen sooner or later, because these creatures forget to eat and so on. When I picked that specimen out of the mud, he made no effort to resist. On the ship, I had a hatch left open for two nights: none of his kind came to rescue him, he made no attempt to escape. They're beyond it. What do you think of such apathy, lieutenant?'

'Ghastly.' Thinking of the child-like woman kissing through the cage bars. 'Ghastly, sir.'

Jonson apparently took the answer in a way that accorded with his ideals, for he nodded approvingly.

'Come along inside, lieutenant. Let's get down to business.'

The door slid open; and, as he crossed the threshold, the Captain's conversation became the prelude to an interview.

'What I expect from my officers, Werner, is initiative combined with discipline and, when necessary, absolute obedience . . .'

'Yes sir.'

The long, cool corridor. Stepping into it, before the door closed, Werner glanced back at the garden, and it was as though he could still hear her, a sing-song voice rising and falling against the fountain:

'Gogo, you funny old thing! Why don't you say something? Why don't you look at me? You funny old thing.'

David Langford

Sex Pirates of The Blood Asteroid

David Langford is an extremely funny writer, and a number of his short stories have been inflicted upon the unsuspecting masses (at least one of them was bought by a dour editor who thought it was a good piece of 'hard' sf . . .). In addition, he has written the non-fiction *War in 2080: The Future of Military Technology*, which has had a great deal of success. In 'Sex Pirates of the Blood Asteroid' he adopts a more serious tone than usual to give us an awesome glimpse of a grim and terrifying future . . .

Trapped!

That was Malsenn's thought as he surveyed the desolate surface of the airless planet. Behind him, his ship the *Star Vole* lay canted at an angle on the rocks, seemingly undamaged—but the drive and communicators were useless.

The ambush had been cunningly planned; the intention was to trap him in the gravitational collapse of an entire galaxy. In escaping, he had burnt out two essential drive-components: a sprocket and a rubber band. The latter he had replaced, using his own springy hair to braid a substitute—but no sprocket could be found.

'Damit!' he cried, lapsing into German.

Above him there leered the camera-eye of a synchronous-orbit satellite, a hundred metres up. It seemed that Nivek, setter of the trap, intended to watch his death. He had less than an hour to wait, for Malsenn felt the unmistakable twinges of his old H-bomb wound which meant the sun would shortly go nova. Meteorites thudded into the ground—he dodged them automatically while pondering the problem.

Perhaps, in the satellite—?

As soon as the thought came to him, he fired his blaster, which would bring down anything not fitted with a fourth-order interference screen.

The satellite was fitted with a fourth-order interference screen.

The sun was growing brighter.

Malsenn dashed into his ship and tore loose two hundred metres of connecting cables. Swiftly he fashioned a lasso, and, again outside, flung the noose up at the satellite. It caught, and held. Now he had only to drag it down, remove the sprocket of its drive, and freedom would be in sight.

He dragged. The satellite responded automatically, firing auxiliary jets to support his weight and maintain its synchronous orbit.

'Rampant reactors!' he swore. Grimly he climbed the cable. Soon he reached the tiny satellite, and rapidly removed a side panel. There, before his very eyes, was a drive sprocket! He wrenched it out eagerly. The satellite began to fall, its jets useless. In haste, Malsenn replaced the sprocket. Once more the jets fired, and the original orbit was restored. This was something of a problem. The sunlight was close to intolerable. There was no way to deactivate the interference screens or bring the satellite down without falling to his death. He climbed down the cable again, and thought hard.

Wait! How did the satellite 'know' what height to maintain? It must use a radar altimeter, since the world was airless. And, in that case, it could be deceived.

He drew his potent blaster and vaporized the rocky ground until a huge pit lay below the point where the satellite orbited. Taking the bottom of the pit as ground-level, it drifted down; as the pit grew deeper, so the automatic controls brought the flying sphere closer, until it hovered in powered synchronous orbit, a metre from the ground. Malsenn stood on the edge of the pit, reached out, and grabbed the sprocket. The satellite fell. Fitting the vital part into his own drive unit, he dashed for the controls and prepared to blast off. Nothing happened. The controls connected to the drive *via* cables—which were now a hundred metres down in the pit.

Time was running out. The sun was about to blow. Striking sparks from his emergency flint, Malsenn ignited the drive-jets manually.

The *Star Vole* was in space three seconds later; the sun went nova at the same time.

'I suppose I'm just lucky,' Malsenn thought, removing his helmet and gasping in exhaustion. He continued to gasp. As a sudden afterthought, he closed the airlock.

The scent was cold, but still Nivek and his dark doings must be sought out and extirpated. So, some days later, a disguised Malsenn slipped into one of those underworld dens where weak-minded persons enjoyed forbidden pleasures. He hoped to find some clue to Nivek's vast schemes, for well he knew that the devilish warlord was behind much of the depravity in the Galaxy.

He sat watchfully. A lascivious 'hostess' sidled up to him, and Malsenn stiffened in alarm. In this hellish pit of vice, they had revived all the old, promiscuous ways of the twentieth century . . . he could see her ankle.

'Wanna good time?' she breathed, swaying sinuously.

Maslenn stood nervously erect. Then he stepped back in horror as her scanty clothes slipped suddenly and slitheringly to the floor, as in that same moment did her skin, revealing the starkly inimical form of a Vomisa killer-robot! With a swift and savage motion, it locked steel claws round Malsenn's neck and squeezed violently. He struggled in desperation against its merciless strength. The other carousers left hurriedly.

'I'm human, you moronic machine!' he gasped. 'What about . . . the First Law?' The robot whirred and clicked.

'Brrrp! A robot may not injure a human being . . . Not relevant. I have not been instructed as to the meaning of the word "injure".' It tightened its grip.

'You're—gnnnh—doing—it—now—'

'Unauthorized personnel may not tamper with memory structures,' the robot grated.

'Second Law! I . . . aaah . . . COMMAND you to stop . . .'

'I am yours to command. As soon as I have carried out my current orders.'

In despair, Malsenn lashed out with his foot, aiming for the robot's delicate power-leads where the legs joined the body. Its gears crashed; it staggered back, releasing him. As it approached once more, Malsenn flung chairs and tables at it without making any impression.

'Third Law—' it droned implacably. 'You will pay for this.'

If only he had his blaster! Or a radioactive source which would deactivate the robot's hydroponic brain. But a pocket torch was his only weapon. He flashed it in his opponent's photoreceptors, but in vain: still the death-machine closed in for the kill.

Wait! What a fool he'd been! Malsenn's almost incredible muscular strength could produce gamma rays, if he timed it right . . . He hurled the torch at the advancing robot with sinew-wrenching force. It hurtled forward at unspeakable speed—10^7 times the velocity of light. The Doppler blueshift increased the frequency of light falling on the robot, up through the ultraviolet and X-ray bands, until hard gamma rays destroyed its very mind. The speeding torch struck, an infinitesimal fraction of a second later, and knocked it over. Malsenn fled—not knowing that he had a follower.

Laura was waiting for him in her room. He entered eagerly; she beckoned him to sit by her.

'We are alone at last,' she said softly.

'Yes, utterly alone,' Malsenn replied, a little apprehensively. But suddenly a strange romantic feeling came over him, and he felt his icy control slipping. Throwing caution to the winds, he moved towards her as the door shattered under the impact of a second Vomisa robot, which proceeded to menace them with a stungun.

With superhuman agility Malsenn dodged the crackling knockout charge that arced from the gun's ugly snout. But still he was caught in a wash of diffracted radiation: numbness began to spread over him. Laura slumped, unconscious.

'Those things take five minutes to recharge,' he grinned, fumbling for the multimegaton blaster on the table.

'Correct.' The robot produced a blaster of its own, and fired at point-blank range. Ravening energies tore at his body; in microseconds all that remained of Mac Malsenn were a fine organic ash and a few scattered gobs of protoplasm. Shouldering Laura's inert form, the robot left, closing the door carefully behind it.

'I have not been instructed as to the meaning of the word "robot",' it remarked apologetically.

'By golly, I'm glad I let the Cosmic Patrol finance that regeneration technique which restores whole bodies from a single cell!'

So saying, Malsenn sprang lithely from his hospital bed.

But what had become of Laura? As he shaved, attacking his whiskers with a tiny nuclear flame-gun, this thought was uppermost in his mind. The bathroom's intercom buzzed, and the voice of Alkloyd, the Starfleet commander, came through.

'Malsenn, is that you? Nivek's got her!' Malsenn's hand jerked, and he singed himself. The voice went on: 'And he's offering to exchange her for you. —You mustn't go of course. After all, she's only a woman . . .'

'Only a woman!' he raged. 'She's a Grade A product . . . six-nines quality . . . unique. And I kinda like her too.'

Embarrassed by his outburst, he flushed, and strode out of the bathroom, heading for Alkloyd's office.

'This just—burns me up,' he said, pacing the floor and rubbing his scorched chin.

'There is an alternative.' Alkloyd pulled a sheet of paper from the teletype.

THERE IS AN ALTERNATIVE, it said. IN EXCHANGE FOR THE HOSTAGE I AM PREPARED TO ACCEPT 500 BATTLE-SQUADRONS FROM STARFLEET—NIVEK.

'We can spare that many,' mused Alkloyd. 'We just now fitted up a thousand squadrons for the secret reserves.'

The teletype clattered. PS: AND ANOTHER 1000 FROM THE SECRET RESERVES—NIVEK.

'We'll meet the terms.' Alkloyd stood up. 'Remember, there are always—' his voice fell— 'the secret weapons.'

'True,' Malsenn agreed. 'But I'm still going to go . . . now.'

'You must stay with Starfleet! They need you!'

'Goodbye. I'll be back—with Laura!' Alkloyd winced as the door slammed. Of course, Starfleet must follow, to back Malsenn's wild gamble. With sudden pride, he breathed the Starfleet anthem:

Forward, fleet, and fight the foe—
Tubes ignite and rockets blow—
See Mac Malsenn, our defender,
Making aliens all surrender!

Far off, in the *Star Vole*, Malsenn scanned the detector screen. In all the vast immensity of space, one signal stood out: a brilliant

blip flashing in the orange-and-purple coding which showed that it represented an object screened against all forms of detection. Surely this must be Nivek! He engaged the new ultradrive, a device which set up a quasi-solid tube of force along which space itself was sucked by capillary action, and the ship leapt forward at billions of parsecs per second. The slower vessels of Starfleet followed faithfully in his wake.

A sense of aching vastness, of shifting parallax and perspective, unthinkable transitions in which the curvatures of space writhe between positive and negative . . . Food concentrates had never suited Malsenn's digestion, but soon his hasty meal was over. Liquid water was an embarrassment in free-fall, and so Malsenn quenched his thirst by chewing a juicy gob of jellylike polywater.

Still travelling at unthinkable velocities, he approached Nivek's monster battle-cruiser, which proved to be shaped like a gigantic cup. The sharp prow of the *Star Vole* penetrated with ease the theoretically impervious energy-fields of the defensive system; space was filled with a hissing sound as layer on layer of screens deflated and collapsed. Malsenn's ship struck the side of the huge dreadnought and stuck there, quivering.

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the enemy craft, the *Saucy Flier*, Nivek himself paced up and down, thanks to the magnetic boots which enabled him to walk on the walls. From time to time he glanced at the corner where sat the helpless figure of Laura, and he drooled lecherously. Yet still his warped mind conceived new, evil schemes.

'I shall release rabid rogue rodents on every planet of the Galaxy,' he muttered. 'I shall cause the stars to go out . . . In the end when I am done, there will be nothing left but the mice and the darkness!' A satanic grin twisted his face, and he gloated all over the room. 'Christ, what an imagination I've got!'

At that instant, a clang resounded through the hull. 'Curses!' cried the fiendish master of subterfuge, 'we've hit another galaxy . . . No, wait! We're not moving. Which means . . .' He leapt to the controls and activated the Hallucinatory Defence systems.

As Malsenn entered the airlock of the *Saucy Flier*, reality suddenly blurred. He found himself looking into a steaming tropical jungle, inhaling rank odours from an unseen swamp. As he

gaped in amazement, a pink *Tyrannosaurus rex* lumbered on its eldritch course towards him, displaying numerous rows of badly cared for teeth. His blaster-bolts had no effect on the great reptile, which blithely ignored the destroying energies, and proceeded to bite Malsenn in the leg. The pain was excruciating. *It must be an illusion*, Malsenn thought. *No real reptile is coloured fluorescent pink* . . . Acting on this thought, he strained his mind to erect a thoughtscreen: *I reject this hallucination*, he cried mentally. *I disbelieve it utterly*. The forest wavered—vanished as though it had never been. Malsenn floated in empty space.

But I do believe in Nivek's ship, he added hastily, and found himself back in the airlock. His leg still ached abominably—that was no illusion. Looking down, he saw that it was locked in the enthusiastic jaws of a large poodle. He shook the dog off irritably, and pressed on, into the secret interior of the ship. Hypnotic hallucinations still flickered everywhere, but now he knew them for what they were.

The control-room! He blasted the door down and entered warily. And he scarcely noticed Nivek, for there before him was—Laura! Her eyes were glassy, her face expressionless, and wires trailed from the back of her head to a control box in Nivek's hands, but she was still the girl he loved.

'That fiend hasn't molested you?' queried Malsenn in frenzy. Nivek pressed a switch on his control-box.

'No,' Laura droned. 'Nivek is kind and sweet, one of the finest humanoids alive.' Malsenn scratched his head in puzzlement. 'But he's destroyed hundreds of planets, thousands of Starfleet vessels, millions of lives!'

'He has always been misunderstood.'

With a sudden flash of intuition Malsenn realized that Laura was not herself. Then she must be . . . somebody else! No, surely it was she. His mind reeled drunkenly. But this was something to be sorted out later. He tossed a sonic knockout-beamer in her direction and explained: 'Keep him covered while I deactivate the ship's defences. Don't worry, you're safe now, whatever that utter rotter has said to you.'

As Malsenn turned to the controls and scanned their cryptic labelling, Nivek manipulated his little control-box. Jerkily, Laura raised the beamer, and fired.

Malsenn's awakening was harsh. He found himself in a strange room, his wrists and ankles clamped to the floor by heavy plutonium manacles. An anti-photon beam was searing a deep groove in the steel floor, and tracking slowly in his direction. Wisps of nerve-gas puffed from nozzles in the ceiling; acid dripped onto his chest from a bottle suspended a foot above him; scorpions scuttled from concealed slots, and the walls of the room gradually moved in to crush him. And all the while, his body began to freeze, for the thermometer registered −12.2 degrees Centigrade.

'This is going to be difficult,' Malsenn muttered. He thought with incredible speed, blowing out the encephalograph which was monitoring his torment. Soon he conceived three entirely novel philosophies of the cosmos, but dismissed these idle thoughts impatiently. With scant seconds to go before the end . . . SOLUTION! The fingers of his hands twitched and writhed. Maddened by the movement, slavering scorpions rushed towards him and stung him, as he had hoped. Agony tore through his nerves; his hands swelled up painfully at once, bursting the manacles in the process. Holding his breath against the nerve-gas, he sat up, grabbed the acid bottle—fortunately his laminated polyparot shirt had protected him so far—and used it to dissolve the ankle-shackles. With one mighty bound, he escaped the approaching anti-photon beam with microseconds to spare; leaping towards this potent weapon, he used it to cut a neat Gothic-arched door in the metal wall.

Free at last from Nivek's insidious control, Laura stared in horror at the warlord's lascivious features.

'Fear not, my little one,' he whispered silkily, 'it is indeed a great honour to enjoy my passionate embraces.' She screamed, but the sound was drowned in the clamour of an alarm-bell.

'It is Malsenn! He has escaped and found this secret chamber! I cannot face him now. Farewell, sugar . . .' He was gone. Laura fainted, again.

In seconds, a portion of the wall glowed white-hot and vaporized. Malsenn dropped the anti-photon beam at last, and leapt in, blaster at the ready. Nivek confronted him.

'Curses,' breathed the gaunt, evil form, 'you have penetrated my seven veils of secrecy. Yet think not that this knowledge will

avail you in the vast onslaught which is to come!' As Malsenn loosed the awful power of his blaster, Nivek unscrupulously faded and vanished—a 3D holographic projection, intended to delay Malsenn for vital seconds whilst the real, devious warlord made good his escape.

But there on the couch, covered by only a thin sheet, was Laura! He gazed lovingly down at her unconscious form. Even as he feasted his eyes, she stirred, and the sheet slid to the floor, revealing her more fully.

'Gosh,' thought Malsenn, 'she remembered the regulations and kept her space-suit on.'

He lifted her and ran for the airlock, darting away in his little speedster even as the *Saucy Flier's* atomic reactor blew. The battered hulk of Nivek's ship fell into orbit; exposed to the glare of the naked sun, it would drift on the currents of space till the end of eternity.

Safe in the whirling framework of Space Station 470-EVX, Malsenn allowed his injuries to be briefly treated. Laura insisted on preparing him a meal.

She looked puzzled. 'That's odd, Mac, the tea won't pour straight. Look! it curves sideways in the air.'

Malsenn looked uncomfortable. He had just returned from the bathroom.

'Er . . . yes, I had noticed the effect. It's produced by Coriolis force owing to this satellite's spin.' The secret hazards of space! He changed the subject. 'Food smells good. What is it?'

'My special. Clam chowder garnished with powdered rhinoceros horn.'

'Oh.' He ate rapidly. Presently, Alkloyd came in.

'*Sacre bleu*, Malsenn, you've been taking some risks!' But it did not occur to him that Malsenn need not have endangered his life. Cosmic Agents always endangered their lives. It was one of the rules.

'Aw . . . shucks.' Malsenn stood up hastily. 'Time to go, anyway.'

'Oh, not so soon, Mac?' wailed Laura.

''Fraid so.' Impelled by a sudden surge of desire, he drew her towards him and kissed her lingeringly on the forehead. As he strode out, her eyes were moist.

And now, to the battle! The forces of the vengeful Nivek were massing for the greatest offensive the Universe had ever known. Nor was he alone, for allied with him was a race of horrifically indescribable creatures known as the Ech. No human had ever gazed on their hideous bodily form and remained sane; they incorporated all the least pleasant characteristics of octopi, sabre-tooth tigers, scorpions, slugs, blue whales and the unspeakable Sirian rogue mice. As has been mentioned before, they were indescribable.

Malsenn had attempted to foresee the course of the coming conflict by peering into a pane of 'fast glass', through which light travelled at many times its normal speed, enabling him to see into the future. But the mighty clash yet to come had predictably warped the very fabric of space and time, and the outlook was hazy.

As well as the conventional thousands of squadrons of ships, the standard mobile planets and the entirely predictable dirigible solar systems, Nivek had three complete flying star-clusters in the vanguard of his colossal force. Against this, Starfleet could muster only one small globular cluster—they hoped against hope that the secret weapons would weight the balance in their favour. Their ultimate weapon was yet incomplete.

Each ship of Civilization's Grand Fleet was rendered invisible by a new and ingenious method: a three-dimensional holographic projector which broadcast an image of the ship itself, cleverly devised to radiate 180 degrees out of phase with the light from the actual ship. Thus the overlapping wave-patterns cancelled, and no ship could be seen. To counteract the effect *within* the hull, a second hologram, of the ship's interior, was projected inside: thus the crew could still see what they were doing. This second projection was constantly edited to correspond to the actual state of the interior.

Nevertheless, Nivek knew that Starfleet was near; and so—

Three suns in his starcluster went nova, flooding space with brilliance. And, at that fateful signal, each of Nivek's countless ships and planetary installations discharged the full, awesome power of its primary projectors, the blazing beams of destruction combining into a hellish flare of incalculable incandescence before which no defence might prevail!

Nivek snarled in rage.

'Missed!'

A nearby galaxy was blasted out of existence, but again Starfleet's superior planning had saved them—thanks to Malsenn and the Battle Computer.

In these days of miniaturization, whole libraries of lore could be inscribed on the surfaces of individual electrons; computers sufficient to direct the affairs of a galaxy were reduced to single large molecules weighing only a few ounces. But so complex had warfare become that the Grand Fleet Battle Computer occupied four giant transport craft which lumbered along in the rear of the fleet, linked together by innumerable connecting wires. A fifth of these monster vessels carried the countless batteries which would be necessary in the event of a power-failure. But still it was not enough; whole subfleets might be directed by the WC (War Computer), but only Malsenn's mind could hold the full incredibly ramified battle plan.

Now that plan called for the use of the Planck units, weird weapons based in that most fundamental concept of science, the Uncertainty Principle. As is well known, the uncertainty of a body's position is inversely proportional to that of its velocity. So when the micrometrically exact Planck units were called into play, measuring the location of enemy ships with uncanny precision, the uncertainty in velocity became so great that the ships were thrown completely out of control. It could not last: the Planck units were too unstable and pernickety (a common disciplinary penalty in Starfleet was 'working the Planck'); still, thousands of collisions took place before Nivek's technicians managed to jam them.

These jamming-zones of interference might have cut off the War Computer completely, isolating it from the fleets it directed; but the cunning secondary communications avoided this peril, involving as they did countless strings and wires stretching for light-years between the ships. (An earlier attempt to fit carrier pigeons with space-suits had proved unworkable.)

Again Nivek let loose a torrent of destruction from every ship and planet; this time half the fleet's starcluster was destroyed. Starfleet countered with their own primary beams, together with showers of neutrino bombs. These last caused great disruption of the alien fleets, for neutrinos pass with ease through parsecs of lead, and ordinary screens are useless.

Nivek rallied rapidly with antimatter missiles, and again a stalemate was achieved. Now Starfleet spread out huge mirrors of aluminized plastic, parsecs across, which for an instant reflected the hellish energies of the enemy weapons back to their source; but soon they vaporized under the load, and only a few hundred thousand ships were destroyed by the manoeuvre. Starfleet's morale fell.

The fleets of Nivek and the Ech, sensing imminent victory, moved to englobe Starfleet. In the Command ship, Malsenn and Alkloyd issued frantic orders.

'Manoeuvre OX6005tb! And jump to it!' cried the Commander.

'No! Make that Manoeuvre QX6005tb/1!' Malsenn yelled decisively.

At that instant, a stray bolt of energy, of almost unendurable poignancy, struck the Command vessel. The screens held—barely. They flared a delicate puce under the titanic strain, the interior of the control-room crackled with electrical discharges, and the artificial-gravity plates reversed polarity. The crew's magnetic boots held them to the floor, and they adjusted with practised speed to the reversal. Malsenn lowered his eyes to heaven and cursed. Alkloyd, too, looked down at the ceiling with wry amusement, but continued to speak.

'I think it's time for us to throw up the gauntlet!'

As the enemy hordes moved to englobe them, each Starfleet ship blasted outward at full emergency acceleration so that the fleets formed two concentric globes, expanding at incalculable speed as each fleet attempted to surround the other simultaneously. But Starfleet could not accelerate enough to pass through Nivek's ships and surround them, for the propulsors were the same on both fleets—and Nivek had started first.

So the spheres grew vaster and vaster, for it was suicide for either to stop. Tension mounted in Starfleet Command, for there they knew what a desperate gamble Malsenn was taking, a gamble starkly inconceivable to those who knew nothing of topology or cosmology!

Imagine a group of running men, spreading out from a given point on some smooth, waterless world. Sooner or later the ring of runners will converge again at the antipodean point. So it is with the Universe, which curves through four-dimensioned

space in precisely the same manner. And thus—

Imagine, now, Nivek's horror, minutes later, at finding his fleet converging on a single point in space, rushing towards cataclysmic collision at the opposite pole of the Universe! Finding his fleet englobed by the triumphant forces of Civilization! Deadly energy-beams lanced from every side into his milling, confused ships. Worse was to come for, at that fatal moment, Malsenn snapped a further order, bringing in the final weapons completed scant seconds before. The invisibility screens went down, revealing—

Galaxies! Seven of them. Armed and powered as only a galaxy can be armed and powered.

Explosion! Concussion! The energies of a billion suns blazed against Nivek's ships, against the forces of the Ech. Under that titanic onslaught, the cosmic process of continuous creation went into reverse. Nothing remained.

In the last instant before total destruction, a subspace signal was beamed from the *Saucy Flier II*. If it was a cry for help, no help came.

Malsenn's homecoming was triumphant; but soon he left the riotous celebrations to be alone with Laura once more.

'Please don't, Mac, it hurts . . .' She staggered back, dazed by Malsenn's brutal attack. Suddenly contrite, he took her hand and begged for forgiveness.

'I should never have let you be my sparring partner anyway,' he said softly.

'Oh, Mac . . .'

Later, he lay in bed and gazed into her enigmatic eyes. Strange longings surged within him. He wanted . . . He wanted . . . The vidphone connection broke suddenly, and he cursed.

And on a far planet, a planet where a complex subspace receiving apparatus had picked up a brainwave pattern and impressed it on the cortex of a cloned body, Nivek shook an angry fist at the stars.

'You have not heard the last of me, Malsenn!' he shouted. 'You have won this round, perhaps—but *the end is not yet*!'

Steven Spruill

Prime Culture

Steven Spruill describes himself in the following letter to me; what he doesn't mention is that he's one of the most interesting new writers on the American sf scene. His letter:

I have a masters degree in clinical psychology and have just completed my doctoral internship at a community mental health center in Virginia. I expect to receive the Ph.D. degree in clinical psychology by the winter of 1979 and thereafter to maintain a private practice in psychology while continuing to write. I sold my first science-fiction novel, *Keepers of the Gate*, to Doubleday in 1976. That novel has since been reprinted in UK hardback and by publishing houses in Italy and Argentina and in US paperback by Dell. My second novel, *The Psychopath Plague*, was also published by Doubleday and in November 1978 in the UK, and in a US paperback version in May of 1979. A novella entitled *The Janus Equation* is in press with Dell, and I have recently sold another science-fiction novel to Doubleday and a thriller to Playboy Press.

1

The tinned air of the Captain's suit was not the only bitter taste in his mouth as he watched the trio of aliens glide across the chartreuse meadow toward his ship. Within a hundred strokes of his heart he would preside over mankind's first encounter with extraterrestrial intelligence. He had always dreamt of being the man who would lead humanity into its first contact, but not like this; not at the worst possible moment for first contact in human history.

That the aliens were intelligent he could not doubt. Mere animals did not dress in short-legged suits trimmed in silver. Nor, as a rule of thumb, did their brain/body size ratios reach the magnitude suggested by the large, horizontally elongated heads which he could make out even at this distance. That they were aliens, in a technical sense of the word, was much less clear. Spang

reminded himself that, in all likelihood, Paraganses II was their native planet and he and his crew were the true aliens. The thought dislocated his perception of the forty people spread out around the landing legs of the *Destiny*. A moment before, they had been horsing about their jobs, glad to be stretching their legs and sweating up their suits in the soft yellow light of Paraganses. Now they stood with unearthly stillness, and Spang could almost see them through the eyes of the approaching creatures: *aliens*.

He took a last look from his vantage on the landing ladder: two rimmed nares where the nose should be, bulging lavender-coloured jowls to which an outside pair of necks added extra support. Lord, what were those, centred in each of the three necks? Dainty white-lipped mouths. What, then, was the simpering slit on the face? At least they were bilaterally symmetrical bipeds, with two eyes and the proper number of arms; give them that. Seeing that he had no more time, Spang descended the ladder and walked to meet them. The trio stopped at the edge of the tramped-down circle of grass, and human and extraterrestrial studied each other. The outside necks flexed with improbable grace as the aliens exchanged glances. Spang cleared his throat and said, 'We come in peace,' his words turned flat by the chest broadcaster in his suit. *We come in peace. I'm a civilized man, and perhaps there is room here for both of us.*

The alien closest to him stepped forward and enfolded Spang in a gentle embrace, which brought Maines, the security chief, jumping forward. Spang waved him off as the alien let go and delivered a musical phrase in three separate pitches, each throat-mouth chiming in slightly out of sync. Then all three aliens lay down and began to roll playfully in the grass.

2

'We've got to remember,' said Florin, the xenobiologist, 'that it may have only *looked* playful.'

Spang gazed past the group of officers gathered around the conference table and out the now-transparent headquarters dome to where a dozen or so of the Paragansians were lying at the base of the *Destiny*, apparently napping peacefully.

'We can't possibly be sure of the meaning of their gestures,' Florin went on, 'and we should guard against interpreting them

in the light of our own behavioural signal system.' Florin was an obese man with exophthalmic eyes which seemed always to stare.

'They do seem friendly though, don't they?' Spang said.

'Seem. That's precisely my point.'

Spang turned to the linguist, Elsa McDaniels. 'How about language?'

'In the three days since they showed up, I've sorted out over a thousand frequently reproduced sounds which appear to occur only in certain contexts.' McDaniels' long platinum hair looked slightly plastered under the plastic suit; Spang remembered her on shipboard the night they'd bunked together and hoped they could soon discard the suits so that he could see the breezes of Paraganses II rippling through her hair.

'Maines, have the rovers run across any signs of a civilization other than our friends out there?'

'Negative, sir. We've got a radius of three hundred miles surveyed and everywhere it's the same. Gorgeous rolling hills, wild orchards, streams, some roughly cultivated fields and hundreds of friendly Paragansians.'

'Right, Maines. We're not ready to print up the travel brochures just yet.'

'No, sir. Interesting, though: most of the ones we've seen aren't wearing clothes.'

'Not surprising,' Spang grunted. 'The climate's ideal, assuming they're warm-blooded like us.'

'Yes, sir. It is ideal. Some of my crews are beginning to wonder just when we'll be able to shed our skins. After all, the air checks out good—real good, and we've been living on the canned stuff for so long.'

Spang looked at Marie Chotobar, the virologist, knowing already what she'd say.

'I'm sorry, Mr Maines, but it would be very foolish at this point to de-suit.' Chotobar's voice was soft and attractive, and if Spang closed his eyes he could almost forget the plain chunky-looking face and the blunt fingers with their faded purple colchicine stains. 'But why would I want to forget?' he asked himself, washing out the vagrant attraction to Chotobar with a visual shot of Elsa McDaniels.

'I need more time for my cultures to develop,' Chotobar explained. 'Also, Prexy says he's not feeling just right.'

'Prexy never feels just right,' Florin said. 'That damned chimpanzee is a hypochondriac and you know it.'

Chotobar weathered the laughter without smiling. 'He should be feeling great,' she said. 'Just liberated on a fresh beautiful planet after two and one half years shipboard. He should be swinging through the trees. I talked with him before the conference. He feels listless.'

'How's he doing on the local food?' Spang asked.

'All right. Fine as far as I can tell. Look, I can understand you all wanting to get out of your filtered suits—hell, I'm wearing one, too. But I can't authorize it. Not yet. We don't know what kind of viral forms might infest the Paragansians, and, as roughly similar bipeds, they're our biggest threat for a communicable form. It might be totally harmless to them and fatal to us.'

'Is there anything we can do to speed up the quarantine?' Spang asked.

'It'd help if I could examine one of the Paragansians, take a blood sample, but I presume that's impossible for now.'

'How soon do you think you can begin translating their speech?' Spang asked McDaniels.

'Really, Captain. This is the first encounter we've had with an intelligent alien species and each one of them can speak with three voices at once. It may be years before I crack it, and we certainly don't want to wait that long to ask them for ten cc's of their blood so that we can get out of these plastic bags.'

Spang frowned slightly, not liking the way she openly did his reasoning for him. If bed with her was going to mean too much familiarity, he could do without the pleasure.

'Sir, I'm sure I could bag one of them for you,' Maines said. 'We could probably lead one right in to Dr Chotobar's lab and she'd have her sample before it knew what was happening.'

Before *it* knew, Spang thought.

'I'd veto that,' Florin said. 'You can't tell how the Paragansians would react. Puncturing their skin could be an act of war, certainly a personally assaultive gesture at the very least. There are thousands of them and only forty of us.'

'Nevertheless, it may be something to consider,' Spang said, wanting to reassert some of his authority, 'after we've observed them a bit longer. Meanwhile, carry on with your duties and stay in your suits at all times.'

3

Spang had no intention of violating his own order when, on the sixth day, with Prexy still feeling off-colour and Marie Chotobar stubbornly holding out against de-suiting, he found himself in the opaqued private unit of Elsa McDaniels, which was located at the edge of base camp in a clump of silvery-leafed trees. She had stripped beneath the clear plastic of her suit to panties and bra, stashing her outer garments in the zip compartment at her back.

'Sorry, *mon capitan*,' she'd punned when he'd entered the squat inflated dome of her unit, 'but another day and those clothes would have become a permanent part of my anatomy.'

'That would be a shame,' Spang said, feeling awkward.

'Come by to see about the language?' she asked impishly.

'Well, yes. How's it coming?'

'Much better than I'd expected, actually. I'm beginning to make out pivot and open functions and I'm getting a handle on their modifier classes as well.'

'Pivot and open? Sounds vaguely sexual,' Spang said, surprising himself. McDaniels studied him; ran her tongue slowly over her lips in a gesture he found shockingly wanton. 'I haven't seen you around camp,' he said, to cover his sudden confusion. 'Where have you been working?'

'Oh, I had Maines take me out to survey camp three,' she replied. 'There's quite a settlement of Paragansians out there. Farmers, apparently, though pretty careless ones I'd say. They don't bother with straight rows or any of that obsessive-compulsive stuff. The planet's so fertile that it doesn't much matter how they plant.' She removed a squeeze tube from her food-stores locker. 'I was about to eat. Care to join me?'

Spang accepted a tube of fish-flavoured soyeast, breaking the seal by inserting it into the fitted mouth orifice of the suit. He emptied the tube without tasting, trying not to think of the juicy cream-coloured fruits that Chotobar's chimpanzee had been eating for six days. McDaniels moved closer to him.

'Captain—Oren, we've found it, haven't we. We've found it at last.'

'It's beginning to look that way.'

'Have you sent the message back to Earth?'

'Not yet. There is a complication, you know. The place is already inhabited.'

'They're friendly. I'm sure we could co-exist with them.'

'Do you get that from your language studies?'

'I'm not that far along yet, not to talk philosophy with them, if they have a philosophy. But look at them. They're like puppies. They've made no objection to the spread of our survey teams. Besides, do you really think we have a choice?'

'We could keep looking until we find an uninhabited planet.'

'Come on, Oren. Two and one half years at warp speeds. Only six planets we could even land on, and all of them totally unsuitable, even with the prospect of massive terraforming. Finding this place was a fantastic piece of luck. A planet like Earth must have been five thousand years ago, only better, and you say keep looking?'

'The Paragansians.'

McDaniels sighed. 'Look, I've been working with them. I like them. They're interesting and even a bit lovable once you get over their bizarre appearance. But there's a thing called Manifest Destiny, whether we like it or not. It's been happening on Earth since the beginning of history, and it will go on. Our ship's named after it.'

'Our ship is *Destiny*. There's a big difference.'

'Sentiment for the Paragansians is all very pretty until you remember that your family back on Earth is sharing two twelve-by-sixteen rooms with another family, and they're part of the *privileged* class. Face it, Oren. We've got at least to pretend that our own species is the prime culture in the Universe, or we might as well turn back right now.'

'Really?' Spang studied her hair, the beautiful platinum mane which she kept long against all common sense. *How had she got it so clean without taking her suit off?*

'Damned right,' McDaniels said. 'You should be glad that fate has handed you a relatively easy choice. The Paragansians are quite obviously our cultural inferiors . . .' She realized that he was gazing at her hair. 'You bastard; you'd stamp them out in a minute if you had to. You've just been playing with me.'

'No,' Spang said, 'but I'd like to.'

They reached up and unmelded the sealed seams of their suits.

4

Chief security officer Maines came across the spaceships on the ninth day. Driving his two-seated rover out from survey camp three, he topped a rise and braked to an abrupt halt, rubbing through the plastic of his suit at the sudden rash of goosebumps on his neck. The three sleek ships stood in a precise grouping at the points of an imaginary equilateral triangle. The bottom third of each ship ballooned outward in what looked like Earth-standard antigrav pods, but the tapering prows with dumbell protruberances near the tips were unmistakably alien, as was the purple lettering on the sides. At the base of the nearest ship stood one of the plentiful silver-leafed trees, a sapling judging by other specimens Maines had seen. A breeze sorted through the dark undersides of the leaves, semaphoring occult patterns. Five adult Paragansians rolled in the deep grass between the ships, exposing now an arm and now a leg, like indolent lions after a feed.

Maines turned to Barbra Kiley, the surveyor. 'Better radio base and get the Captain out here.'

'Huh?'

He stared at her, noting the way she merely glanced at the ships before turning dreamy eyes to the horizon.

'What's the matter with you? Wake up, Kiley; those are alien ships out there.'

'Don't get tense, Elleston,' she murmered.

The goosebumps on Maines' neck found new life. Now that he thought about it, Kiley had been acting strangely all morning. Normally talkative, she'd said only a few words since climbing into the rover. He'd had to remind her to get her recorder. And she *had* been sitting closer than usual to him, even letting her hand rest briefly on his shoulder after it had bounced there going over a bump. The associations were going now, and Maines realized that she'd stopped complaining two days ago about the tinny recycled air in their suits. Her surveys had become more and more cursory, and she'd found excuses to get away from him, which he'd attributed to the fact that women never much liked him anyway. *Discipline was getting shot to bloody hell, that was the problem.*

Looking back at the ships, he decided Kiley would have to

wait. He punched the communicator switch. 'This is survey rover gamma, coordinates . . .' he checked the computer display, 'grid sixty-four, fourth quadrant. Better get the captain out here fast. Acknowledge.'

'Acknowledged,' said a laconic voice after a moment's delay. Maines turned back to Kiley, who had at least begun to look at the ships with a degree of interest.

'We'd better wait until the Captain arrives,' he said. 'He can get here in about twenty minutes in one of the pods.'

She nodded. 'Don't you wish you could just go down there with the Paragansians. Take your suit off and roll in the grass?'

'Don't talk rot.'

'Really, Elleston. You need to loosen up.'

'Dr Chotobar hasn't yet given the OK to de-suit,' Maines said pointedly.

'That's stupid and you know it. Just because an old chimp doesn't feel good. I heard Prexy's been messing up on his Ameslan lately anyway, so how does she know how he feels?'

'That's not the point. We follow orders.'

'Oh, wise up, will you? The air here is fine . . .'

'Don't go any further. I don't want to hear it. If the Captain finds out . . .' He stopped, gasping slightly as her hand curled on his thigh.

'You're sweet, Elleston. You don't want to turn me in for breathing.'

He sat there, rigid, afraid she would slip her hand up a bit and discover the hard bulge in his crotch.

'Look at me, Elleston.'

His head crept around until he was staring into her wide pupils. She pursed her lips as though in her mind they were already moulded against his. Then the drone of a ship's pod penetrated the pounding in his ears and Maines jumped down from the rover, his face red. The pod settled and Captain Spang got out, accompanied by Elsa McDaniels, the linguist.

The exit ports on all three ships were open, humanoid type ladders extended. The party had to push aside purple flowering creepers which had grown upward and into the stern bays. Maines stuck close by the captain as they made their way from one dark compartment to the next, exploring with a flashrod from the rover. Most of the compartments were empty of all but

a few spartan furnishings, short cots and webbed acceleration chairs, and the controls and hardware of the ship, but in a forward room Maines discovered one of the dark rubber suits with silver trim they had first seen on the trio of aliens the day after landing.

'That clinches it,' said McDaniels. 'These ships must've belonged to the Paragansians.'

'Not necessarily,' Maines said. 'You saw them playing around the ship. Maybe they just left the clothes here.' He looked at the Captain for encouragement but Spang merely grunted. 'Uh, have the aliens mentioned anything about these ships, Dr McDaniels?' Maines asked.

'Naturally, I haven't asked them.'

Spang looked around the cabin and Maines noted uneasily that his captain had seemed to shiver. 'Let's get outside and talk to those characters that were lying in the grass,' Spang said. 'They ought to know something.'

Two of the Paragansians had gone, but McDaniels was able to engage one of the remaining, a big unclothed male, in a melodious slightly hooting dialogue in which the creature, for whatever reason—perhaps politeness—used only one of its vocal systems. The dialogue went on for some time, and Maines was growing restless when he felt Kiley's shoulder move against his. He frowned desperately at her but she smiled back and rolled her eyes.

McDaniels turned away from the Paragansian. 'They know nothing about the ships; just that they've always been here as long as they or their ancestors can remember.'

'Kiley, what is the age of these ships?' Spang asked.

Maines felt relief as she stepped away from him.

'I don't know.'

For a moment the three of them stared at her as though she had made an indelicate sound. The captain said in a dangerously patient voice, 'Then perhaps you'd be good enough to scan the ship now.'

With no apparent embarrassment Kiley unslung her chronalyte and passed it over one of the slightly pitted landing legs.

'A hundred years,' she said.

5

Spang sighed and sat back in the big swivel command chair on the deck of his ship, where he'd taken to staying more and more. 'I understand your feelings, Dr Chotobar,' he said, 'but I decided for a number of reasons that it was best to give the order.'

'They are not my *feelings*,' Marie Chotobar said, two spots of colour appearing at the tops of her cheeks. 'They are my scientific judgements.'

'Yes, yes. Please sit down.' Spang pointed to the exec's chair, which was mounted on a slightly lower dais to the side of his own central platform; Chotobar declined with a jerk of her head. In an effort to collect his thoughts, Spang looked down at the base camp through the panoramic beta-glass window, swivelling his command chair. It was afternoon, and he'd have preferred more signs of activity rather than half the personal domes being opaqued for privacy, but let them nap. Or whatever else it was they were doing. The sample survey was almost finished anyway.

'I cannot understand,' Chotobar said when Spang had let a moment pass in silence, 'why you think it safe to de-suit just when we discover that the Paragansians came here in highly advanced ships, of which they have since come to have no memory. Aren't you the slightest bit afraid of what made them forget?'

'Whatever caused that memory loss will probably never be known,' Spang said. 'It may even have been something in the air, as you seem to be implying. We have no idea what their food and respiratory requirements are like. Perhaps their sensors were inadequate in some way and failed to pick up elements in the food or air which, to them, were subtly injurious. The point is, our own sensors are not inadequate. This air is precisely like that of Earth and I can no longer justify not letting my crew breathe it. I suggest you take your own suit off as the others have done.'

'You're ignoring the possibility of viruses,' Chotobar said. 'They're not an element of the air, *per se*, but they can be airborne or spread by physical contact or insect vectors, all of which cannot penetrate our suits.'

'I asked you again, before I gave the order, whether you had got any evidence of such a virus,' Spang reminded her, 'and you said that you had not. Not in twelve days you haven't.'

'Twelve days is an eyeblink, Captain. Viruses can be extremely adaptive forms. We really have no guarantee what a Paragansian virus would look like, how it would behave.'

'I wasn't aware that viruses behaved at all.'

'I can assure you that they do.'

'Dr Chotobar—Marie—we are here to see if this planet is fit for human colonization. That colonization must occur as soon as possible if our culture is to survive. This planet has passed every instrument test we can give it and de-suiting was not only inevitable, it is the final necessity; the final test. Besides, some of the crew had no doubt been doing it on the sly, days before I gave the order. They're all in good health.'

'Are you certain of that, Captain?'

'You and Percival have been monitoring their condition. Have you found anything?'

'Only a slight decrease in total oxygen uptake by the blood, much too trivial for significance, but that's not the point. Haven't you seen what's been going on since you gave the order?'

Spang looked at the stocky woman, frumpishly dressed beneath the plastic suit in grey fatigues stained with purple, and wondered with a touch of pity if she could bring herself to say it. The stubby fingers fidgeted at her sides for a moment and then she said, 'They, they're cohabiting.'

'Cohabiting,' Spang said, mercilessly.

'Oh, come on, Captain. Making love. They've all crawled off to their domes, and you don't really think it's to rest, do you?'

Spang smiled slightly at the irony of her thinking him naïve. 'I see nothing wrong with that, Marie. They're grown up adults who've been cooped up in space for a long time. Besides, this place does do wonders for one's romantic nature, don't you think?'

Chotobar looked away from him and he saw in a slap of insight that she was in love with him. The knowledge made him sad.

'Marie,' he said gently. 'What's the real reason you're so upset? You've covertly taken breath samples from the Paragansians and cultured them in every medium in your laboratory. No results. You haven't a shred of evidence that the aliens can infect us. So why the stubborn resistance to taking off that wretched suit?'

'I don't suppose you care,' she said bitingly. 'Perhaps it's even why you gave the order to de-suit.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I'm sure it never crossed your mind that even if the Paragansians can't infect us, there's a good chance we can infect them.'

6

Two days later, on the fourteenth day of the survey of Paraganses II, the aliens began to die. It was a decimation far worse than the missionaries of an earlier century had inflicted upon the Polynesian islanders of the Pacific. It was a fatal plague that raged through the aliens with frightening speed. Dr Chotobar managed to get a couple of them into her lab and Spang came as soon as she and Percival, the ship's physician, had finished their examination.

Elsa McDaniels was standing off to the side of the lab, her face empty of expression, and Dr Chotobar, still defiantly sealed inside her plastic suit, was leaning, elbows stiff, on the edge of the examination table. Dr Percival passed Spang at the door, holding his nose in a rather childish way that was nevertheless appropriate. The lab stank terribly. Spang forced himself to walk up beside Dr Chotobar to look at the staring liquid eyes of what he still thought of as a Paragansian, even though the creature was as alien to the planet as he. The slit mouth, which Florin, the xenobiologist, had said was strictly for eating, was rippled like a clamshell. The three vocal mouths were gaping and slack, the organ-pipe voices stilled permanently.

'Do you know what caused it?'

'Oh yes. One of the rhinoviruses. A common cold. Only not common to a Paragansian.'

'I suppose you'll say "I told you so".'

'I'll take no gratification from the death of these beings, Captain. Not even that much.'

'Of course. Can we do anything to help the Paragansians that are still healthy?'

She gave him a truculent look. 'Not a thing, any more than we could for ourselves if we came down with it. It's a cold, Captain. Just a snotty nose, and it's bloody incurable for us and for them.'

Spang turned away; looked at McDaniels, feeling alarm at her slack expression. 'Elsa . . .?'

'They couldn't talk,' she said. 'I tried to talk to them but they couldn't.'

'Perhaps they were too ill.'

'No.' She paused for a long time. 'No, it wasn't like that. There was a difference in their eyes, like something had left them. They couldn't *remember* how to talk.'

Spang turned back to Chotobar. 'Is Percival planning an autopsy?'

'Percival's gone off to screw your communications officer,' Chotobar said hotly. 'It was all he could do to tear himself away . . .'

'That's enough.'

'Anyway, I'll do what's required myself.'

McDaniels slipped her hand onto his arm. 'Can we get out of here, Oren?'

He felt pulled, invisibly stretched between the two women. Chotobar continued to lean on the table, to gaze at the face of the dead alien.

'If you need me for anything, give a call to the bridge.'

'I won't need you, Oren.'

Spang let McDaniels lead him out of the lab.

Later, after they had made love with mindless urgency on a webfoam couch intended for medical emergencies on the bridge, Spang let his hand rest in the warm crevice between McDaniels' breasts and thought about the plague.

'Elsa?'

'Mmmf.'

'I'm thinking something terrible.'

'Love me again, Oren.'

'I'm thinking that the plague among the Paragansians solves the dilemma of who should get this planet. It's almost as though there *is* a true Manifest Destiny—a physical thing which has made a choice between the two cultures.' *A Manifest Destiny named Oren Spang*, he thought, inviting the guilt. After all, he had given the order to de-suit. And now he would flagellate himself, humanity's slick super-ego tactic to ward off a greater punishment, the punishment of having to change. *See, I've suffered for my sins. The account is square.* 'How subtle it is,' he thought.

'Even the truth I use only to punish myself.'

'You are terrible,' McDaniels murmured, 'and your penance shall be to love me again.'

That night Spang sent the message to Earth. The computer encoded it, plotted the correct communications window to Earth, and sent it out in repeated waves, giving the coordinates of Paraganses, the word that it was a paradise planet, the order that the great colony ships should be launched without delay.

7

Dr Chotobar straightened from her microscope under which was centred a cross-section of Paragansian brain tissue. Moving like a sleepwalker she retrieved the most recent blood smear taken in routine crew sampling. She compared the two slides for a long time, tried to rub her eyes through the thin plastic of the suit; looked at the slides again. Then she ran from the lab, knocking over a rack of petrie dishes in her haste. Base camp looked nearly deserted. A number of the personal domes ranged around the flanks of the ship were opaqued even though it was noon. A member of Maines' security team sat propped against a tree, playing a harmonica quite badly. He simpered at her as she hurried past. A naked crewman burst from a nearby hut and ran across in front of her, an equally naked woman pursuing him. Both were laughing and a stream of saliva angled back on the woman's cheek. Chotobar felt the burn of nausea at the angles of her jaw: *God, was it this bad already?* She paced back and forth across the narrow elevator, expelling herself onto the bridge as soon as the door cycled open. Captain Spang was sitting in the command chair, and a glance told her that for once he was alone.

'Captain, I've got to talk to you.'

Spang nodded.

'I've been studying the slides and we've got to do something quickly.'

'I don't understand.'

'Captain . . .' She took a stalling breath; tried to prepare what she had to say. 'Captain, the Paragansians are dead. All of them.'

'I know that.'

'What you don't know is that when they started dying from the cold virus . . . Oh, God. I knew there was something but I

couldn't have found it, not until now. I've been working night and day.'

Spang got up and came to her; held her shoulders in his powerful hands. 'I know, I know,' he said soothingly. 'You've been working much too hard. Now, calm down and tell me what's the matter.'

'Have you seen the crew today? No one's working. They're all just lying around or, in their domes . . . some of them . . .'

'I've given them nothing to do. A day off.' Spang kept his gentle grip on her shoulders. *How confident he sounded.*

'A virus,' she said, 'needs a host—is always looking for a host. But if it's got one it likes, it may or may not institute efforts to change. Sneezing is like that, the way a virus gets its host to spread it to other hosts so it can go on multiplying.'

Spang frowned. 'You're not making sense.'

'Please, you've got to understand all of it. That cold virus will stay in your system most of the time, not making any trouble. You won't even know it's there. Then it overreaches a bit and the body starts to react with a fever. The virus has been counter-attacked and suddenly it wants a new host.'

'You make them sound intelligent.'

She put a hand to her forehead; pinched the bridge of her nose through the suit. 'No, no, Captain, not intelligent. They're the furthest thing from it. Some biologists are still arguing over whether they're even alive. But you have to understand this. Viruses have an enormous advantage over the intelligent life-forms: they can produce millions of descendants in a very short time. Their development is shaped just as ours is by the forces of natural selection. These forces can have a major multigenerational impact on adapting a virus in the amount of time it takes you to get a good night's sleep.'

'Marie, what is all this about?'

She could feel his fingers squeezing gently at her arms, continually shifting in a slow almost sexual rhythm to which her body began to respond. *No, this is madness*, she thought. How can I make him understand? 'The Paragansians,' she said, 'had a virus.'

'I know. The cold virus; they caught it from us.'

'No, before that. They had another virus, or something like a virus, though it's biochemically much more complex than any

Earth form. It lived in their brains. I've seen the dead ones in microscopic cross-sections.'

'In their brains?'

'Yes. My guess is, it inhabited a lower lifeform on this planet until the Paragansians came in their ships. Then it invaded them. For some reason it favours brain tissue, but in any case, the point is that this virus has adapted in a way I have never seen. It's why I didn't catch it before, in the crew blood samples. God, if only I'd guessed . . .'

'Please,' Spang said, 'you're too upset.'

'It's a chameleon virus, Captain. Somehow, I don't know how, it achieved an evolutionary adaptation giving it tremendous morphological—and even some functional—plasticity, enabling it to mimic whatever microorganisms are in its vicinity. The mutation has tremendous utility because it confuses the body's immune systems; fools the antibodies. Remember I told you haemoglobin functions were down slightly? It's because this virus had agglutinated into lumps that resembled RBCs almost perfectly. I was taking a simple microscopic look at slides and testing oxygen absorption of known quantities of blood, and haemoglobin was down because the agglutinated virus copied the erythrocyte morphology almost perfectly, but did much less well in copying the oxygen absorption function. That was my clue, my one chance.'

Spang looked blank and Dr Chotobar reminded herself that he was not a scientist. 'Captain, the thing is, when these viruses get to the brain tissue, they leave the bloodstream and dig in, because brain cells are their favourite culture.'

'Prime culture?' Spang murmured.

She paused, chilled by his faraway look. 'You could put it that way. The virus invades the actual brain cells and again copies form but does much less well with function. There exists only marginal functional capacity as the virus adapts itself more and more precisely to its permanent environment. I'd never have recognized the chameleon virus except that, when the Paragansians died, those virus particles still in the brain died too, and lost their elasticity; they resumed what must be their basal form, which is more classically viral. Remember, Captain, how Elsa McDaniels said the Paragansians lost their language ability before they died? It's because the viral parasitism in their brains

was broken up as the virus reacted to the physiological indicators that its host was dying. The original, much greater mental capacity of the Paragansians had been destroyed long before, when the viral parasitism was first established. As the cold virus, to which the aliens had no immunity, destroyed the Paragansians, the viral braincell analogues that could not escape the body died too, and even the marginal intellectual capacity was lost.'

'The virus escaped?' Spang's voice seemed querulous, and Chotobar clenched her teeth. *Hurry, Marie, hurry.* 'Yes, they escaped into us. It's why Prexy, my chimp, who never wore a suit in the first place, became listless, ultimately even forgetting how to speak sign language. It's why everyone's slacked off in their work . . .'

'I gave them the day off . . .'

'Captain, will you *listen*? It's why everyone's been banging like a colony of horny hamsters. A viral effect—perhaps another adaptation affecting the hormones from the brain level so that we'll all have babies who can be vertically infected before they're even born. You've got it, Captain. You've all got it.'

'You say a virus has attacked me, is trying to ruin my brain? I don't feel any different.'

'Not trying to ruin your brain. There is no will involved. To a virus, a human is just a way to make more viruses.'

'I feel fine,' Spang persisted.

'Have you sent the message to Earth yet?'

'Message?'

'The message telling them to send the colonists.'

'Right. I did that yesterday.'

'Bloody hell. Captain, you've got to send another message right away, warning them to keep off.'

'You feel good, Marie.' Spang moved in closer to her, his hands still holding her upper arms. 'I want to kiss you.'

She tried to back away and his grip tightened. 'God, oh, God. Try to think, Oren . . .'

His hand was at the seal of her suit and she began to fight him, but he was too strong, and he got the seam open, pressed his lips against hers, while a white star of panic went nova in her brain. One of her flailing hands hit the rupter on Spang's hip. She clutched it and brought a knee up, sending the Captain stumbling backward, bent over.

'Please, Marie . . .' he moaned, then the whites showed above his pupils as he saw the rupter shaking wildly in her hand. For a moment she could only gasp again and again, wanting to hurl his air from her lungs, to scrub her lips; then she got on with what she had to do.

'Captain, prepare to send a message.'

Spang looked around vaguely, took a few steps in the direction of the communications panel. 'I forget . . .'

'Get over there, *now*!'

'I can't,' Spang wailed. Tears coursed down his cheeks. Chotobar set the rupter to stun and felled him with a wide beam. She had to study the tortuous instructions and diagrams of the communications manual for nearly an hour before she could set up the message. The captain was stirring on the floor when she'd finally got it programmed and pushed the transmit button. The message was simple. It would repeat for a full week at thirty-second intervals, the computer adjusting the narrow sending beam automatically as Paraganses II and Earth wheeled their patterns through the void:

DISREGARD PREVIOUS MESSAGE. DO NOT SEND COLONY SHIPS. EXPEDITION DESTROYED BY ALIEN VIRUS WHICH ATTACKS THE BRAIN. IMPERATIVE NO LANDING BE ATTEMPTED ON PARAGANSES II. CHOTOBAR.

When she had finished, Dr Chotobar tore off her suit and hurled it across the bridge. Then she sat down across from the captain, levelling the rupter at him. *How many times she had wanted him, and now it was only a matter of time.* The captain dried his eyes and smiled seductively at her, and Marie Chotobar began to weep.

8

On the fifth month after the second Terran landing on Paraganses II, a survey party led by Captain Alistair Marsh, which was looking for good sites to expand the colony, came across Captain Spang's group. The group consisted of the raggedly dressed Spang, three former security men, and seven women who

had performed various duties on the original survey mission. One of the women was short and chunky, and wore tattered grey fatigues with purple stains. There were fourteen happily naked infants and children between the ages of four months and twelve years.

Marsh halted his party and watched with an iron-mask expression as Spang and the others ambled over to meet him. 'It's like we thought,' Marsh's chief security officer said. 'There never was any virus. They wanted the whole bleeding thing for themselves. A new Garden of Eden. Bastards.'

Spang was only a few feet away now. He smiled at the survey party and said, 'Hello,' and gave Marsh a gentle hug, falling to roll in the grass when the Captain shoved him away.

'Confine all of the adults to the brig at Alphatown,' Marsh commanded. 'Put the children in the nursery.'

Terry Tapp

And Englishmen

My first reaction to this tale was that the background owed a lot to E.M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'. Tapp replied promptly: 'Yes, of course it does. I wanted to extend "The Machine Stops", just a little and in only one direction. It's a magnificent story, but it leaves all sorts of unanswered questions in my mind. "And Englishmen" isn't really an answer at all, it's just my rendition in short-story form of one of those questions. I've also set the story somewhat closer in the future than is Forster's because I wanted to explore the links between present-day society and the kind of society that he envisaged.'

I like this story because it gives me a feeling of 'now, why didn't I think of that?'.

He growled something obscene into the voicebox so it would recognize him and allow him into his home: he resented the sentry system. The door sighed, bored and languid, pumped open and waited as the sound-actuated lock reset itself and the photo eye winked at him passing through. Using the piston stick on his ballchair, he pushed himself manually into the lobby, pausing by the living-room door to check that his right hand was hidden completely by the blanket. Switching over to automatic, he pointed the ballchair at the door and drove at it full speed.

'One of these days,' he thought, 'I'm going to glide straight at that damnfool door and it won't open up for me.'

But the door did open, in the very last fraction of a second, so that he skimmed through into the hysterical chaos and the cigarette smoke and the body heat which had been generated by the three people in the room. They were draped over the chairs where they had thrown themselves like disjointed rag dolls, their faces sweat glossy from laughing.

'Good evening,' he said to nobody in particular.

Nobody said 'good evening' back at him and he didn't expect them to anyway.

Lottie snapped her eyes up from the videogame, her face slick

with excitement. She made a smile up for him—a thin, poorly effort. 'Hi,' was her greeting.

He rotated the ballchair so he could see them all.

'We had a giant in here today,' Uncle Albert told him. 'It was a damn' great thing and I wrestled the hell out of him.'

'Yes,' Lottie broke in. 'You were very brave, Uncle Albert. Very, very brave.'

'Damn' great thing,' Uncle Albert repeated over and over. 'But I beat him.'

'Good for you,' he said. 'Well done, Uncle Albert.' Now the pain was feeding on the open wound in his hand, tearing at the flesh, gnawing to the bone and making the flesh turn a sickly yellow. The hand jerked under the blanket, causing Lottie to look up sharply.

'What have you got under there?' she asked.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Nothing.'

She pulled her lips back to her gums in a knowing grin. 'You have,' she said. 'You *have* got something under there. Come on now. What is it? Is it a present? A present for me?'

'No. It isn't a present. It's nothing. Listen, you'll have to excuse me. I'm going through to the recliner.'

Lottie pouted her disappointment. 'No present?'

'I'll get you something tomorrow,' he promised. 'Now, you'll have to forgive me. I'm very tired.'

'You been out in the hallways again?' Aunty May switched off the remote knitter and put the electric needles across her lap. 'It ain't healthy to go prowling around them hallways unless you have to,' she said, her face spread thick with malice. Aunty May had plenty of malice to spend; she was rich with it. 'It ain't normal, either. You should use the vacuum tube like proper people.'

'He suffers from claustrophobia,' Lottie cut in defensively. 'You do, don't you?'

He nodded, passing his good hand across his wet forehead, letting them get on with it.

'He can't stand enclosed places. That's what claustrophobia is, you know. It isn't very nice at all and I'm sure you wouldn't like it, Aunty May.' Lottie leaned over from her ballchair and sucked a wet, invisible kiss across the room to him, which he pretended not to notice.

'It was a damn' great giant,' Uncle Albert said, his eyes windowed over with the scene so that he was blind to everything. 'I can programme up a replay on the video hologram recorder if you like. I've seen it three times already.'

'Some other time, Uncle,' he said. 'I'm too tired to enjoy it right now.'

Lottie's ballchair scampered sympathetically across to him, sidling up and whining like a cur, her face now twisted into a parody of the mask of desolation she had just seen on Afternoon Theatre. 'What is it? What is it, darling?'

He turned away, the teeth of the pain now hard upon the bone, gouging deep into his useless hand so that great bubbles of perspiration squeezed out of his forehead running cold, thin rivers down his face. 'It's nothing,' he said, urging up dry words out of his stomach into his mouth and spitting them out hard. 'Nothing at all.' He just wanted to be left alone so that he could hold the burning hand and rock it and cradle it and maybe even cry over it. It had been years since he had cried.

'I know you,' Lottie said; then, in a louder voice for all to hear: 'I know my husband and I know when things are not right with him. A woman knows.' Her hand went out to his secret, hidden hand and he felt the scream gale out of his mouth long long before the pain hit him.

He screamed, eyes wide open, locked tight by the sawing pain. He couldn't speak or move.

'Oh, God!' Lottie shrilled. 'Look at his hand!'

The blanket had been pulled aside to expose his hand. They looked, searching the yellow, festering wound. They couldn't *feel* it; they could only rape it with their wondering eyes.

'Cover it over,' he whispered, scared that the pain might hear his voice and turn on him again. 'Do it gently.'

Taking the blanket between forefinger and thumb, Lottie held it high and let it drop. 'How? For Chrissakes how did you get your hand cut like that?'

'He done it in the hallways,' Aunty May said. 'That's how it happened.' She gave out a laugh which finished up as a cough and nearly choked her. Uncle Albert just watched.

'I'm going to the recliner room,' he said.

'You do that,' Lottie told him solicitously, her lips pouting soothingly as she absently comforted her man-child husband.

'I'll be in to see you later.' Then she turned back to the video-game.

When he was alone in the room and the soundproof panel had slid over the door, he felt he could, at last, cry out at the pain. But now he didn't want to. Sitting there, rocking and moaning, his mind went off somewhere to rest, leaving him alone, hypnotized and afraid.

Later, he didn't know or care how much later, Lottie glided into the room on her ballchair, the manufactured mask wiped off her face now that they were alone. 'You still up?'

He didn't bother to answer. It was a stupid question anyway.

'They've gone,' she said.

He nodded. Message received and for God's sake don't talk or you'll make the pain come back.

'Did you put your hand in the Medik?'

He shook his head, each movement surfacing him to consciousness.

'Why not? You should have put it in the Medik and it would have been better by now. Can I look at it?'

For the first time that night he looked at her—really looked.

'Why?' he asked.

'Well,' she grinned coyly, 'when people cut themselves they usually go straight to a Medik and no one else gets the chance to see it first. I just want to look.'

He pulled the blanket off and let her look.

'Christ, it's yellow,' she said. It was an impartial observation.

'Yes.' The hand glistened out a tidal wave of yellow stuff and he felt curiously divorced from it.

'I've never seen anything so horrible,' she informed him with some satisfaction. 'How long has it been like that?'

'Days; a couple of days maybe.'

'I'll switch on the Medik and get it programmed for you,' she said, gliding the ballchair over to the vanitory unit and pressing the pad panel. 'Name?' She spelled it out. 'Personal code number?' Her fingers dabbed that out too. Lottie loved to work machines. Then she dabbed out the symptoms on the alphabet pad and marked 'affirmative' when the videoscreen asked if there was pain.

'I don't want the Medik,' he said, coming alongside her and pushing the error pad. 'It will clear up on its own.'

'Rubbish,' she snapped. 'Now I'll have to programme this all over again.'

She pressed the pad and he put his good hand over hers, pressing it down hard, hard, glad to see that she was feeling the pain, glad to make her take part in his life for a brief while instead of for ever thinking about videogames.

'You're hurting me,' she said, her eyes now swimming with tears. 'Let me go!'

He removed his hand, not feeling regret, or sympathy.

'You've been out again,' she said, holding her hand under her breast. 'I can always tell when you've been out.'

It was a statement and he wouldn't deny it.

'You'll get us into awful trouble. Going out into the hallways is one thing, but up there—' She couldn't even contemplate such a thing. 'You smell different when you come back.'

'I have to go,' he said.

'You *have* to crawl through ventilators?'

'It isn't just ventilators,' he said. 'There's more—outside.'

'Outside?'

'Past the ventilators and out into the open.'

'I don't want to hear it,' she said, covering her ears with her palms, letting words bubble out of her mouth like firefoam to smother anything he said. 'It isn't allowed to go into the ventilators and there's nothing beyond. Nothing. Man wasn't made to go through ventilators.'

'Was Man made to build ballchairs for himself?' he asked. 'Did God make Man and forget to give him feet?'

'We don't need feet,' she said. 'God gave us the good sense to make ballchairs so we wouldn't need feet.'

'And he gave us the good sense to make videogames so we wouldn't ever need to think to question life.'

'We could all end up in detention if they ever found out that you had been pulling yourself through the ventilator shafts,' she said. 'How do you do it anyway?'

'I walk,' he said.

'Walk?' She gave a laugh of uncertainty. 'You walk?'

And he was a boy again, his face grinning, his mouth chocolate-smeared with a smile. 'Yes, I can walk.' Then he pushed the blanket aside. 'Look, I've been exercising my legs and I can walk.'

'Nobody walks,' she said. 'Only to get to the recliner—that's all people ever walk for.'

Anchoring the ballchair he rested his hand on the arm and pulled himself upright so that he grew and grew until his whole body was upright and he was a thousand miles tall. Lottie covered her open mouth with her fingers. 'You'll kill yourself doing that!'

He laughed, balancing himself until both legs were spaced apart and he felt secure. 'Watch me, Lottie!'

He took a step—then another and two more quick ones, covering the width of the room faster than a ballchair ever could. 'I can walk,' he said. 'Think of it—people used to do this all the time.'

'What for?' Lottie asked.

'To get places,' he said vaguely. 'People would walk all day.'

'Sit down,' she said. 'Come back to the ballchair. I'm scared to see you like that; it makes me feel—lonely.'

'Lonely?' He laughed aloud, forgetting the pain which still gnawed at him. 'You have no idea what loneliness is. When I was up there, out through the ventilator shaft and into the open, I could look for miles and miles and not see anyone.'

'Don't tell me about it. I don't want to hear.'

He was in front of her now, unsteady, but triumphant. 'God, Lottie, you've no idea how beautiful it is up there. Colours, shapes, moving creatures—I have never seen such a place. It has no ceiling and the air is fresh and clean. . . .'

'Shut up!' Lottie screamed. 'Don't tell me. It's obscene to even talk about it.'

'It's like I've been to Heaven,' he said. 'Did you know that? Heaven is just up there, past the ventilator valve. It was easy getting past the valve. All I had to do was pull it in towards me and squeeze myself through.'

Now Lottie was pretending to ignore him, staring at her face in the electronic reflector, peeling her polyprilene lashes off her lids, wiping her rouge away with impregnated tissues.

'Will you stop that!' he cried, taking hold of her wrist and bearing it down so that she was forced back in the ballchair.

'Look,' he said, pulling a flat, square thing from his tunic. 'I found this up there. It's a book. You should see all the pictures in it. There is food up there, Lottie, just growing off wild trees like

we have in our Regional Conservatory areas. Wild trees—imagine that.'

He fluttered the pages at her, making a fresh, clear wind so that the wings of the pages threw out brief images. She watched the picture shapes flick past, then put her finger out to stop them. 'What's that?'

He folded the page back. 'That is how people used to be,' he said. 'See how we stood upright?'

'It's revolting,' she shuddered. 'Put it in the incinerator.'

'Come up with me,' he said. 'Come up there with me and see for yourself. You could learn to walk and we could walk together. The whole place is covered by a green carpet.'

'Please,' she said, her eyes now full of fear. 'Don't tell me any more. You know what the videoscreen commercials tell us—even if it's your own family, you have to report lawbreakers. I don't want to have to report you.'

'Would you?' he asked.

She didn't answer. 'Put your hand in the Medik.'

'Would you report me?'

'For Christ's sake put your hand in the Medik,' she said.

'No—I can't.'

'The pain will go immediately.'

'I know, but I can't do it. Do you think I would have put up with this pain if I could be cured by Medik? If I let them examine the tissue on a sample probe they'll know that I've been up there.'

'How?'

'Because the cut in my hand was caused by something up there.'

'What? I don't understand.'

'Some living thing— don't ask me what. It came at me and took my hand in its teeth.'

'Bit you? This thing bit you?'

'Yes. . . . .it bit me. I had to fight it off. Don't you see? If I put my hand into Medik, they'll relay the diagnosis to Central Control and the computer will raise the alarm. I want it cured, God knows that. I want the pain to go.'

'Then let me get some painkillers through the Medik dispenser,' Lottie said. 'I'll get them on my code number.'

'Thanks,' he said.

She pressed the pad and told Medik that she had terrible headaches and that she thought it was her migraine again. Medik prescribed two pills and spat them into the tray. Lottie took the pills in her hand and went over to the vanitory basin for the water.

She took the painkillers to him as he sat back in the ballchair, his face lined with pain.

He took the tablets, smiling his gratitude at her, then he held out his hand for the glass of water.

'What is it?' she said. 'What's the matter with you?'

His eyes looked away, wildly around the room, anywhere but at that glass of water. He couldn't bear to look at it.

'Here,' Lottie said. 'Drink it. It's only water.' She thrust it at him.

And he screamed and screamed and screamed. . .

Colin Wilson

TIMESLIP

Just as soon as you look at the title above you'll realize that this is a time-travel story; however, as one might expect from Wilson, it's an unusual one. Ever since Wells' *The Time Machine*, time-travel stories have had a preoccupation with hardware—note the very title, *The Time Machine*, and think of all the tales where people step into cabinets, go through doorways of electromagnetic forcewarps (or some other suitably impressive pseudoscientific abstract), sit in machines, place helmets stuffed with electrodes on their heads . . . Here, however, Wilson has succeeded in creating one of the very few time-travel stories where the mode of transit requires no technological equipment. Yet his tale is still, to my mind, 'hard' rather than 'soft' sf in that it is rooted so firmly in modern scientific research—the split-brain experiments that he mentions are fascinating, and the reference quoted in the story is well worth following up.

Introductory Note

When the editor of this book asked me to write a science-fiction story, I explained that I seem to be incapable of writing short stories. I have tried, but they turn into novels.

Six months later, when we met to discuss another project, I brought up a more basic objection: that science fiction seems to me less interesting than scientific fact. I instanced the remarkable career of Nicola Tesla, whose unpublished discoveries—he died in poverty and neglect—could still revolutionize the technology of the twenty-first century. He agreed, but pointed out that Tesla's name is now well known. He added that if I could produce an *unknown* true story as exciting as Tesla's, he would be delighted to publish it.

Which is how I came to write this account of the disappearance of Richard Bowen.

1

Britain in the 1970s is, according to the textbooks, a modern economy that compares favourably with most others in Western Europe. But this fact has never been brought to the attention of British Rail, which continues to run its services with a distinctively nineteenth-century approach. This is an observation that crossed the mind of Professor Richard Bowen, of the University of Saskatchewan, as he attempted to get from Cambridge to Great Malvern on an afternoon in the September of 1971, and discovered that he had to change at Biggleswade, Bedford and Evesham. It did not bother him unduly since he had plenty of time and was powerfully affected by the charm of the English countryside.

Dr Bowen had spent the previous weekend attending a conference at Churchill College, Cambridge, organized by the International Institute of Linguistics—where he had, in fact, met me. I and the novelist Anthony Burgess had engaged in a public discussion, chaired by Dr George Steiner, on the role of language in the novel. The part I play in the following story is a minor one; but I mention it because Dr Bowen told me that he spent the first lap of the journey, from Cambridge to Biggleswade, making notes about our discussion for an article he intended to write for *The Saskatchewan Review*. Having done so, he realized that he had left the Maigret he was reading in the dining-room at Churchill, and strolled along the platform at Biggleswade to see what the station bookstall could provide. The answer, apparently, was almost nothing, apart from newspapers and magazines, and a few paperbacks with titles like *The Football Annual* and *The Great TV Stars*. The only thing that looked remotely promising was a paperback entitled *Weekend Ghosts*, with a lurid cover of a skull peering out of a haunting sheet. Bowen was not interested in ghosts, but his host's twelve-year-old son was, so he bought it as a present. He hoped to pay a visit to the station bookstall in Bedford, but his connection was already in when he arrived, and there was no time. So as the train rattled slowly in the direction of Towcester and Stratford-on-Avon, Bowen stared idly out of the window, then looked into *Weekend Ghosts*.

I have a copy of the book in front of me as I write. It is edited by a journalist, and the stories have titles like 'The Ghost that

Thumbed a Lift' and 'The Man Who Knew the Future'. It is rather better produced than most things of the sort, on good paper, with photographs printed in the text. And, since it is supposed to be a kind of tourist's guide to British ghosts, it has a map at the end showing the various sites with a key underneath. Bowen looked to see if there were any sites in the area through which he was travelling. There *were* a few—a black dog at Kineton, a Grey Lady at Knightcote, and so on. Then a name caught his eye—Stoke Warmington. Bowen recognized it as a village associated with his family: his great grandfather, who emigrated to Canada in the early 1870s to work on the Canadian Pacific Railroad, came from Stoke Warmington, which is on the borders of Northamptonshire and Warwickshire. And, according to *Weekend Ghosts*, Stoke Warmington had a phantom coach and four that was sometimes seen in Pig Lane. Bowen turned to the story. It told how the local squire had deliberately run down and killed a young shepherd who had been paying court to his daughter: the iron tyre of the squire's coach had crushed the young man's skull. The squire had shot himself—perhaps because of his daughter's despair—and now the coach is occasionally seen, or heard, after heavy rainstorms. It was the usual absurd ghost story. But Bowen felt a wave of nostalgia and a desire to see the village of his ancestors.

It happened that he was in no particular hurry to get back to Great Malvern; his hosts were away for a long weekend, and would not return until the following morning; Bowen had the front door key. His guide book showed him that he could get off the train at Stratford-on-Avon; Stoke Warmington was about ten miles away. The idea appealed to him; it was still only mid-afternoon, and it would be easy enough to find accommodation. So Bowen alighted at Stratford.

On the platform, he had a painful accident. Trying to skirt a luggage trolley, he tripped and struck his left knee against the iron rim. It was so painful that he almost fainted. The porter—who was unloading the luggage van—was apologetic, and Bowen limped to the nearest seat and sat down heavily. He was feeling faint and sick, and wanted to be left alone. After ten minutes or so, when the pain had subsided, he stood up and hobbled outside. In the taxi to Stoke Warmington he pulled up his trouser leg and examined the knee; it was bruised, but nothing seemed to

be broken. Half an hour later, the taxi dropped him at the Swan Inn, where Bowen was able to book a room for the night. It was a pleasant room, overlooking a stable yard. Bowen ordered tea; and, when the girl who brought it told him that Pig Lane was only a hundred yards away, behind the Market Hall, he decided to ignore his swollen knee and take a walk.

Stoke Warmington is an attractive village which is listed in the Domesday Book. Built around a 'cross'—an octagonal building that once had a cross on top—it has a church and Market Hall dating from the fourteenth century. 'Stoke' means a monastery cell, and the village probably acquired this name because of the abbey that once stood outside it, of which only part of the foundations now remains.

Pig Lane is only a block away; it runs parallel to the main street. The Market Hall is a typical Warwickshire building, with sixteenth-century timbers and steps that are worn hollow; the cottages around it have the same picturesque, Elizabethan look. But Pig Lane is an unattractive, narrow thoroughfare with a few workmen's cottages, an old stable, a slaughter-house, and a muddy-looking duck pond at the end. Bowen leaned over a garden fence and asked an old lady if she knew anything about the phantom coach. She denied that there *was* any such legend; then, when he showed her the account in *Weekend Ghosts*, she said that it could be another Pig Lane, which used to be on the outskirts of the village in her grandmother's time. It seemed an unpromising beginning.

The knee was becoming painful; Bowen found a wooden bench at the rear of the Market Hall, and sat down in the late afternoon sunlight. He half-closed his eyes, and observed the dancing motes of sunlight through the lashes. He was still feeling sick and exhausted, but the receding tide of discomfort brought an enormous sense of relief and relaxation. The thought that the hotel was only a few yards away, and that he could soon go and restore his spirits with a dry martini, increased his sense of well-being. 'Suddenly, I knew I had found one of those quiet inner-spaces that we experience only once or twice in a lifetime.'* Earlier that day, he had seen a balloon-seller at the entrance to a park; now he recollected the mass of balloons swaying in the sun-

* Letter to the author, 27 September, 1971; unless otherwise acknowledged, the quotes in the following pages are from Bowen's correspondence with the author.

light, and felt as if he had somehow become identified with them, floating and bodiless. He insists that there was nothing 'mystical' about the experience; just deep relaxation, and a feeling of inner freedom which brought memories of childhood Christmases and the sheer joy of seeing the first snow of the year. A newspaper boy went down the street, pushing newspapers into letter-boxes; Bowen watched him with a sympathy which, he admits, bordered on the sentimental. He recalled Woodrow Wilson's remark: 'Peace is the healing and elevating influence of the world', and felt that he understood its inner meaning for the first time.

As the sun moved around, he began to feel chilly; the church clock struck six. A few yards away, a narrow alleyway ran between the Market Hall and the wall of the old slaughter-house, with a bollard at either end; Bowen decided to walk through it to the main street. As he passed the bollard, he experienced an odd reluctance to go any further. He looked around, wondering if he had sensed some danger. There was nothing and, after a moment, he walked on. Suddenly, the sense of oppression became intolerable. 'I can only describe it as a kind of grey, formless misery.' He stood still again, and started to turn back. At the other end of the passageway he could see the village cross in the sunlight and people walking past. It all looked so normal that his reluctance seemed absurd. 'All I can say is that the street seemed a mile away, and I felt as if there was some particularly nasty danger between me and it.' Bowen went back to Pig Lane; it seemed the most sensible thing to do. At the same time, he knew that if he went back to the hotel by the other route, the experience would worry him for the rest of the evening. Finally, telling himself that this fear was stupid, he walked back into the alleyway. This time he walked as fast as his swollen knee would allow. The oppression returned immediately. He forced himself to go on, and began to receive distinct impressions. There was an unpleasant, almost sickening, smell, mixed with another smell like some kind of polish. There was also a clear impression of violence and death, of someone being killed with an axe. He was even certain that it was the *back* of the axe that had been used, not the blade, and that it contained a kind of point. Then, halfway down the alley, the oppression vanished. He practically ran out into the sunlight at the other end. He realized that he was

perspiring and feeling very weak, as if he had wakened from a fever.

Bowen was thoughtful as he limped back to the Swan. I have said that he was a man who had absolutely no interest in ghosts or paranormal research. It was not that he was a sceptic or an agnostic; just that he found the subject as alien as football. Bowen is best known to his academic colleagues for his book *Saussure and the Foundations of Linguistic Structuralism** and a remarkable essay, *From Humboldt to Chomsky*.† The whole notion of 'occultism' struck him, quite simply, as an irrelevance. 'Yet,' he says, 'the experience was so real that it was clearly incumbent on me to make room for it in my scheme of things.'

He thought about it a great deal that evening. There was no doubt in his mind that it was somehow connected with the state of relaxation and 'openness'. A few minutes before he turned into the alleyway, he had been overwhelmed with childhood memories. Could that sense of oppression have been some other memory of childhood? On the whole, he was inclined to doubt it; his childhood had been happy and uneventful. But his ancestors had lived here in Stoke Warmington, and fragments of them lived on in him. The experience could have been some kind of racial memory . . .

He drank half a bottle of red wine with his dinner; by ten o'clock he was sleepy. It was a warm night; he could not resist walking to the door of the Swan and looking down the street towards the cross. Then, telling himself that he needed a breath of night air before he went to bed, he stepped onto the pavement and walked down the street. A discotheque was open somewhere, and the noise of pop music sounded incongruous. He passed the Market Hall, where a crowd of young people were sitting on the steps, and stopped at the end of the alleyway. It looked dark. He hesitated, his heart beating uncomfortably, then took a step into it. He advanced slowly, like a man wading into cold water. There was nothing. When he passed the half-way point he heard voices whispering, but realized that two lovers were embracing in a doorway; he quickened his step and walked down to Pig Lane. It

* Chicago University Press, 1968

† *Saskatchewan Review*, Spring 1969. Reprinted Bowes and Bowes, Edinburgh, 1970.

had been like walking through any other street; he felt relieved, and also slightly disappointed.

That night Bowen slept deeply and heavily. When he woke at dawn the room seemed unreal; he had recollections of strange dreams, but they vanished as soon as he opened his eyes. Waking was like struggling up from some enormous depth. He drifted back to sleep and did not reawake until half-past eight. Now he felt 'normal' again, apart from that pleasant holiday feeling that he had experienced the previous afternoon. The knee was still bruised, but had noticeably improved. However, as he ate his breakfast, sitting by a leaded window that overlooked the street, he felt unusually tired, as if some inner-spring of force had been exhausted.

At half-past nine he walked down the main street to Pig Lane. It was a day of clouds with intermittent sunlight, and there was a cool breeze. In Pig Lane, he again sat down on the bench behind the Market Hall; but the sun was round the other side of the building, and it was too chilly to stay there long. So he did what he had intended, and turned again into the alleyway. At once he experienced the same sensation as he had the previous day, but this time far less strongly. There *was* a sense of fear and oppression; but so faint that he would not have observed it unless he had been looking for it. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly there. He found that he could take exactly eight steps to a point just beyond half-way down the alley, before it vanished. Then he walked back very slowly, keeping close to the wall of the slaughter-house. The sensation was strongest close to a bricked-in doorway; there, he again picked up the sensation of someone being violently killed by an axe-blow.

What fascinated Bowen was that it *was* a matter of 'picking up' the impressions, like a radio set trying to tune-in. If he allowed something to distract him, or began to *think* about what was happening, it faded. Yet as soon as he relaxed and made his mind a blank, it returned. In describing the experience to me, he compared it to a faint electric shock—a slight tingling sensation that continued for as long as he chose to focus his mind on it.

What puzzled him most was that all this seemed completely *natural*—at least, so long as he made no attempt to think about it. There was nothing spooky or frightening about the sensation

of 'knowing' about some previous inhabitant of Stoke Warmington. It was only when he tried to explain it that he began to worry.

Being a sensible and pragmatic person, it struck Bowen that the first problem was to find out about the history of the alleyway. And while he was wondering where to begin, he noticed a sign on the 'cross'; it said 'Museum'. The upper room of the building was, in fact, a small museum of local history and crafts. That seemed a good omen. The only person there was the curator, a tall, grey-haired lady named Mrs Llewellyn-Saunders. After glancing around the exhibits—hand looms, domestic implements, old coins, a yellowed skull found in the field next to the abbey—Bowen asked her if she knew anything about the history of the village. She produced the pamphlet on the area by A. McNeil-Sprunt, the local historian. Bowen sat in a corner and read it straight through. He learned that the village was originally called Waermundtone, the town of Waermund's people, and that it could be dated back to AD 972. By 1086, when the Domesday Book was already compiled, the village had grown into a small town with 456 inhabitants, and was now known as Warmintone. William of Normandy gave the whole area, which was heavily forested, to Ralf de fitz Osbern, whom he created a peer; Ralf's son Odo built the abbey in 1120. By 1200 the town was known as Stoke Warmington to distinguish it from another Warmington near Banbury, and by 1300 was a prosperous town with 1,000 inhabitants. The Black Death in 1348 struck it particularly savagely, reducing it to less than 300. By the time of Henry VIII it was again a flourishing community. Lord FitzOsborne was involved in the Catholic rebellion of 1536, and was executed early in the following year; the abbot of the local monastery, Reginald Cassalis—a distant relative of the FitzOsbornes—was accused of complicity, and the abbey was destroyed in November 1536. In 1555, there was another persecution, this time of Protestants, and several were burned in the square in front of the Market Hall. From that time on, the history of Stoke Warmington has been blessedly uneventful, although the church lost its roof in the Civil War.

All this suggested to Bowen that the event that interested him—the violence in the slaughter-house—had taken place in the first half of the sixteenth century, or possibly in 1555. He

asked Mrs Llewellyn-Saunders about McNeil-Sprunt, author of the pamphlet, and was told that he was Emeritus Professor of English Local History at Birmingham University, and that he lived in a large house two miles along the Stratford road. She added that she knew he was at home because she had seen him shopping on the previous afternoon.

Bowen rushed back to the Swan and telephoned McNeil-Sprunt. He explained that he was a Canadian whose ancestors had lived in Stoke Warmington, and that he was trying to find out what he could about the history of the village. When he mentioned his surname, McNeil-Sprint said: 'Ah yes, you'd be one of the Braecknock Owens.' 'Bowen.' 'Yes, it was originally ap-Owen, son of Owen. One of the oldest families in this part. Come over for tea and I'll see what I can find out.'

When Bowen set out to see McNeil-Sprunt that afternoon, he had no intention of speaking about his experience in Pig Lane. He had no wish to be taken for a crank. His first sight of the historian confirmed his decision. Dr McNeil-Sprunt is a big man with a prominent chin; it has often been said that he looks more like a farmer than a university professor. He is also shy, so that his manner on first meeting is apt to be constrained and abrupt. His home, Whitefurrows House, once belonged to a cousin of Sir Thomas Lucy, who supposedly caught Shakespeare poaching deer.

Over tea, Bowen told him what he knew of his family history, and McNeil-Sprunt was able to add a great deal of information. Apparently, the Owens had supported Henry II in his third Welsh campaign, and had been given lands in Warwickshire. One of them had been almoner at the abbey soon after it was built. In the seventeenth century, a highwayman named Bowen had been hung in chains at the Snowshill crossroads, and his mother, Kate Owen, had hired two vagabonds to steal the body. Consequently, all three had been imprisoned at Warwick.

Bowen said: 'She was drowned as a witch.'

McNeil-Sprunt said with surprise: 'That's right. Where did you learn that?'

Bowen said with embarrassment, for it had simply come into his head, 'I'm not sure.'

'You heard it from one of your parents, I suppose?'

Bowen said he supposed he had.

'Which seems to show that you must be descended from Kate Owen. Which is rather odd, because her other son moved out of the district. Are you sure your grandfather came from Stoke Warmington?'

Suddenly, Bowen felt that he had to tell McNeil-Sprunt the truth. He took a deep breath and said: 'I think perhaps I ought to explain how I come to be here. I had a rather strange experience yesterday . . .' And he plunged into an account of the journey from Cambridge, and how he had come to visit Pig Lane. It was clear from the beginning that McNeil-Sprunt was not going to be dismissive or sceptical. He listened carefully and seriously, then said: 'You ought to write all this down.'

'Why?'

'Because such things ought to be recorded from the beginning. You might decide you wanted to submit it to the Society for Psychical Research.'

Bowen said he didn't think it qualified as a psychic experience.

'Then what *would* you call it?'

And Bowen, who had thought this out carefully, said: 'There are three possibilities. The first is that it's pure imagination. The second, that it's some kind of racial memory, a fragment of the collective unconscious of my ancestors. And the third possibility, that it's not a psychological problem at all—just some ordinary form of perception.'

McNeil-Sprunt said blankly: 'Perception?'

By way of illustration, Bowen cited the curious case of the Wizard of Mauritius, Monsieur Bottineau. Bottineau invented a science which he called Nauscopie, which enabled him to detect the approach of vessels long before they arrived at the island; he said that the approaching ship should produce 'a certain effect upon the atmosphere'. In some strange way, Bottineau could detect ships *four days* before they became visible, and he did this hundreds of times over a period of years; documents from the governor of Mauritius, the Attorney General and many others attest to his accuracy. Bottineau said that what he saw on the horizon was a 'meteor'—that is, a meteorological disturbance of the atmosphere, like an attenuated cloud. But although he tried to teach his skill to many others, no one succeeded in acquiring it. It seems, then, that Bottineau's perceptions must have been far more delicate—or highly trained—than those of other

individuals.*

McNeil-Sprunt said: 'So you are suggesting that your perceptions can show you events in the remote past?'

'But they're not in the past. They're in the present. It's rather like an old newsreel . . .'

The historian remained unconvinced. This could be explained by the fact that he knew the well known 'psychic' Ted Lewis, who can walk into a 'haunted house' and describe precisely what tragedy has taken place there. In his autobiography, *More To It Than That*, McNeil-Sprunt has also described his mother's powers of 'second sight'—for example, how she knew about every death in the family at the moment it occurred. This explains why he was immediately able to accept Bowen's description of his own experience—and why he was sceptical of the 'natural' explanation. So the two simply failed to see eye to eye when it came to attempting to explain Bowen's 'impressions'.

McNeil-Sprunt nevertheless had one valuable suggestion. 'Don't tell me any more about your experience, but go back and see if you can pick up anything else. Meanwhile, I'll look into it and see if I can find out what really happened. Then we'll compare notes. But, if this is to be of any value, you mustn't influence me, and I mustn't influence you.'

So Bowen went back to the Swan, and telephoned his friends to say that he would be away for at least another twenty-four hours. By this time, though, he was feeling discouraged. Telling McNeil-Sprunt about it made it all seem less strange and exciting, and he very much doubted whether he could 'pick up' anything more. He revisited the alleyway that evening, before dinner, but there were children playing with toy guns, and they distracted his attention. He could feel something but it seemed much weaker than before. Back at the hotel, he was so exhausted that he could scarcely eat his dinner. A single glass of wine with the meal made his legs feel like lead. That night he slept heavily and dreamlessly.

At dawn he was awakened by the birds; and, as he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, he realized that he was again permeated with that sense of restfulness and well-being that he had experi-

* *See* Sir David Brewster's *Letters on Natural Magic*, and *Oddities* by Rupert T. Gould.

enced in Pig Lane. There was the same sense of mental stillness and freedom. There was also an undertone of excitement, of expectation. He dressed quickly and went downstairs. It was not yet six o'clock, and the front door was still locked. He found his way out through the yard. The streets were empty, and the sky was grey and cloudy. He walked along Pig Lane to the seat behind the Market Hall, and sat down. He felt inwardly relaxed and calm. When he was completely rested, he walked to the end of the alleyway. As soon as he stepped past the bollard, there was the same frightening sense of alienness—but this time he was more aware of its nature. It was like walking into cold water. At the same time, there was a certain *familiarity*, like a memory from the past. The unpleasant smell was also there again.

What amazed Bowen was the familiarity. He said that it was precisely like some forgotten memory of childhood—except that he was aware that he had never been there before. By half-closing his eyes, he could become aware of the alleyway as it was in some other remote childhood. There were no paving stones underfoot—only hard-trampled earth. The Market Hall was there, but it was a dull colour, and the beams were not painted black, as they are today. He also knew why the place had an air of violence. Two people had been murdered in the house next to the slaughter-house. The man had died in the doorway, his head and shoulder-blade crushed by blows from an axe. His chest and right hand had been burned by hot coals. When Bowen stood at a certain spot close to the wall, the smell became suffocating, and he felt faint.

Then he found himself blinking in the sunlight at the Fore Street end of the alleyway. He had no idea of how he got there, had no memory of walking. He was puzzled that the street was crowded with people. He looked at his watch but failed to register the time. It was only as he walked in through the front door of the Swan that he saw the church clock, and realized that it was nearly eight o'clock. Two hours had passed since he left the hotel, and for most of that time his memory was a blank.

2

Dr Bowen told me this story on Monday 4 October, 1971, at the club in our small local market town.

I have already mentioned that we met at the Linguistics Conference at Churchill College in the previous month. Bowen had made an interesting contribution from the floor after my discussion with Anthony Burgess, and that evening we had sat next to one another at dinner. I heard nothing more from him for three weeks, until I got back home from a week in London, and found a telegram from Bowen asking if he could come down to see me. I have to admit that it was not a welcome surprise; we'd had an unusual number of house guests that summer, and my wife and I were looking forward with relief to a quiet autumn. But then, Bowen had struck us both as a gentle, rather shy man, not the type to impose himself on a relative stranger without good reason. On Monday 4 October, I met him off the train and took him to my club for a drink. There, over a bottle of Muscadet, he told me the story of his visit to Stoke Warmington, exactly as I have told it above.

It so happened that it was the publication day of a book of mine called *The Occult*, which I had been writing for the past four years. His story of a 'timeslip' fascinated me, and I asked him if I could use it in a subsequent book. He said yes; then added: 'But I'd rather you waited until the story's complete.'

'Isn't it complete?'

'Not by a long way.' He opened his brief-case and handed me a folder; it contained a dozen typewritten pages. The first contained Bowen's own account of his impressions in the alleyway—the murders, the man who died in the doorway, and a woman who had been killed in an upstairs room. Bowen said that he felt that a third person had also been involved, and that the murderers were subsequently hanged at Tyburn. Bowen had written all this down soon after his return to the Swan that morning.

The next two pages were by McNeil-Sprunt. He summarized the conversation that had taken place between himself and Bowen on 7 September, and added that, on the following day, Bowen had brought him the attached pages, describing a murder that had taken place in Slaughter Row, connecting Pig Lane and Fore Street, Stoke Warmington. He then went on to describe how he—McNeil-Sprunt—had tracked down the details of the crime in Spratton's *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, and later in the anonymous *Lives of the Footpads and Highwaymen* (1726).

It had taken place in April 1592 (the precise date is not given, either in Spratton or in *Lives of the Footpads*). Three desperadoes named Jacob Levee, William Booty and John Claxton had broken into the house of William Jobling, peruke maker of Slaughter Lane, gaining entrance from the slaughter-house next door. 'Having been drinking at the local tavern,' says Spratton, 'they heard rumour that the peruke maker kept hidden a bag of gold inherited from his cousin of Dorsington.' Jobling and his wife were bound and gagged, and their eight-year-old daughter Sarah was tied up in the next room. When Jobling insisted that he had no more than a few shillings in the house, Caxton and Levee burnt his hand with hot coals to force him to tell the truth. One of them threatened to put out Mrs Jobling's eye with a knife. At one point, Jobling showed them a pint pot hidden in a cupboard; it contained thirty-one shillings. While the robbers were searching the house for more money, Jobling somehow untied himself and ran downstairs shouting for help. Claxton followed him, raining blows from an axe that he had picked up in the slaughter-house. Afraid that his cries had aroused the town, the robbers fled; but Mrs Jobling made the mistake of screaming, and Levee ran back into the room and cut her throat.

In fact, the bodies were not found until the following morning, by which time the robbers had escaped. The girl Sarah was still tied to the bed; she was alive, but had been 'most cruelly ravished' by William Booty. The motive for this, it later appeared, was Booty's belief that intercourse with a virgin could cure him of his venereal disease.

Booty and Claxton were arrested early the following year in London for housebreaking. Both were placed 'under pressure', that is, staked down to the floor of a prison cell with heavy weights on their chests. Booty (who was only fifteen) was the first to break down, and confessed to the Stoke Warmington murders, also implicating Levee, who was arrested at a lodging house. All three were hanged at Tyburn, and their bodies hung in chains. *Lives of the Footpads* records that the child died of 'the foul distemper'.

It can be seen that Bowen's impressions were astonishingly accurate, even to the mention of the 'third person', the child Sarah.

I asked Bowen why he considered the story 'unfinished'. He

explained that there were still various loose ends. He mentioned in his account that other houses in the alleyway were inhabited by a harness maker and a cutler; McNeil-Sprunt was at present trying to find out whether this was true. But, said Bowen, there were more important questions unanswered. Through whose 'eyes' had he seen Slaughter Row, as it had existed four centuries ago?

I failed to understand his meaning. Did he believe that he was a reincarnation of someone who had lived there in 1592? But this was apparently *not* what he had in mind. He explained that he felt there was nothing 'supernatural' about his experience. It was nothing to do with ghosts or reincarnation.

It was not until later that evening—when I was lying in bed, reading the remainder of his typescript—that I began to understand Bowen's interesting theory of what had happened. And then I understood why he had come to see me.

At Churchill College, Bowen had been particularly fascinated by the discussion on language between myself and Anthony Burgess. Burgess had taken the view that language is the life-blood of literature, and that the writer's chief concern should be to 'purify the dialect of the tribe'. My own view had not been actually opposed to this; but I had argued that the development of language, with which Burgess is so rightly concerned, is a *by-product* of the development of new perceptions and ideas. If a gardener created a vegetable of a new shade of green, then it would be necessary to invent a new word for this colour. And when a scientist evolves a new idea—like relativity or entropy or the unconscious—he also has to coin new language to express it. I had likened language to a blind man's stick, whose purpose is to probe the unknown.

A few days later, Bowen had been trying to write his article on the conference for the *Saskatchewan Review* when it had struck him that the 'blind man's stick' theory of language could be used to explain his own experiences at Stoke Warmington, for it implies that the world is full of thousands of meanings that we do not yet perceive. They could be compared to thousands of unknown colours. In fact, the world *is* full of unknown colours. Our eyes are attuned to receive light between the wavelengths of 32 and 16 millionths of an inch; energies of longer or shorter wavelength than that are invisible to us. But there is no reason why

this should always be so. Bats can hear sounds well above the range of the human ear; the mechanisms of the human eye could easily become adjusted to see colours beyond the wavelengths of visible light. And they would be *new* colours.

Now, according to Bowen's theory, an event like the tragedy in Slaughter Row would probably leave behind certain 'traces', a kind of invisible photographic record. And for some unknown reason, his senses had become attuned to this 'record' as he entered Slaughter Row. He was convinced that he *saw* the place as it was four hundred years ago; it was not some kind of dream image. I pointed out that he spoke of half-closing his eyes; but he explained that this was because he was seeing two things at once, and was trying not to be distracted by the present-day image of the alleyway.

In that case, I asked, what was the 'photograph' *made of?* What, in other words, was the 'photographic plate' on which the impressions had been etched?

That, said Bowen, was why he considered his story incomplete. There were too many unanswered questions. And he intended to try to find out a few of the answers before he thought of publishing his results.

Bowen stayed with us for three days. During that time, we walked a great deal on the cliffs near my home, and talked endlessly about his experience. I gradually became aware that, in spite of his mild and easy-going appearance, Bowen was a man of almost fanatical determination. He believed, quite simply, that he had been allowed a glimpse of a great secret, a piece of knowledge that could be of immense importance for humankind. And, if necessary, he meant to spend the rest of his life pursuing it.

I found it strange that, for a Professor of Semantics, Bowen found it so hard to express himself. For example, during the whole of that first evening with us, he failed to explain precisely why he had come to see me; it only dawned on me when I read the typescript in which he tries to outline his theory. When I commented on this, Bowen became emphatic, and said *that* was just the point: because his impressions and insights had nothing to do with language. In fact, language was a damn' nuisance; it actually impeded them. He used a curious expression: 'That experience made me realize that I've been wasting my life doing the wrong thing.'

And slowly, I began to understand what he meant, and to share his excitement. What Bowen was saying was this: he was a perfectly ordinary human being—not 'psychic', not particularly gifted, a good academic intelligence. (I am quoting his own words.) Yet he had been made aware that he possessed a faculty for 'seeing' things that had happened long ago. He was convinced that we all possess this faculty, and that it could be developed with a little effort. The trouble, he said, is that we are so 'biased'. We are like trains that run on certain tracks, and are quite unaware that we could go off in a completely different direction.

I asked him whether he had had any other 'experiences' since leaving Stoke Warmington.

'Oh yes. It happens all the time.'

I stared at him with fascination. '*All* the time?'

'Oh, not to the same extent. But now I've got the trick, I can pick up impressions.'

I asked him to describe the trick.

'Well, it's like holding your breath. You know what happens if you suddenly hear a sound that interests you, and you strain your ears and tell everybody to be quiet? It's like that.'

'Can you do it now?' I asked.

'I'll try.'

We had walked along the cliffs, following the National Trust footpath, then turned up a valley towards the farm. He stood still, leaning on a gate. There was no sound but the sea, and the distant lowing of cattle. He said: 'A place like this doesn't give me much to go on. It's not like a town. The only thing I can pick up is that this field is used for sheep-dog trials.'

I had lived in a cottage on the farm for two years in the 1950s, and had never heard of any sheep-dog trials. But as we walked through the farmyard, I saw Bill the shepherd, a man in his eighties, whose family have lived on the farm for generations. I asked him if there had ever been sheep-dog trials on the farm; he looked at me in surprise.

'Oh yes. Every other year. In the odd years they take place at Mr Tregunna's.'

'Up here?'

'No, down in the Paddock Field right next to the cottage.'

Bowen had been right.

I was so impressed that, on the way home, I took a detour to

show him a great standing stone on the edge of the cliff—a natural megalith some twelve feet tall. The stone had always fascinated me—I had often looked at it and wondered about its history. It had probably been there when the Phoenicians sailed along this coast, and still later when the Romans came.

Bowen closed his eyes, then stretched out his hands to embrace the rock. I watched his face closely; it had relaxed, as if he were deeply asleep. He stood like that for a moment, then opened his eyes.

'It's very strong. There's some power there—some force in the stone.'

'What impressions did you get?'

'None worth mentioning. You see, we've talked about it too much, and my old man of the sea's trying to strangle me.'

It was one of my phrases; the 'old man of the sea' is the critical, intellectual part of us that sits on our shoulders and strangles our natural intuition.

Bowen's strange problem now fascinated me so much that I was reluctant to let him go, for it seemed perfectly clear to me that, if this were not some form of self-deception, then it was one of the most important mysteries I had ever encountered. I had always believed that the powers of the human mind are greater than we ever realize, and that the main trouble with human beings is their slavery to habit. But I had always taken it for granted that we can only hope to achieve a few brief glimpses of our true powers. What Bowen was saying was that this is untrue; it merely depends on relaxing slightly more than usual, and then 'tuning in'. He made it sound so normal and easy.

We spent his last evening discussing what he intended to do. He said that he meant to go back to his job at the university; but if it proved impossible to pursue these new ideas as well as working, then he would give up his post. His wife had a small private income and a farm in Connecticut; if necessary they would live there. His strength of purpose impressed me enormously. As I drove him in to the station the next morning, I asked him if he had any idea of *how* he intended to pursue these insights.

'A rough idea. I've got to try and train this faculty—this "negative capability" (he was using Keats' phrase for the poet's ability to absorb experience, to remain 'open'). That means I have to start looking into non-verbal means of communication.

It's not really so different from what I've been doing all my life. Only the opposite.' He gave a dry chuckle.

A month later, I received a letter from him in Saskatchewan. He told me that he had definitely decided to give up his professorship and retire to Connecticut. His wife was upset at the idea, but could see how much it meant to him.

The decision had been prompted by a discovery he had made in London. I had persuaded him to visit the premises of the Society for Psychical Research. The librarian there, a Miss O'Keefe, had been enormously helpful. When he told her about his experience at Stoke Warmington, she had explained that this was a not uncommon experience, and that it was technically known as psychometry. At first, Bowen was sceptical; but she handed him a volume called *Psychometry: The Dawn of a New Civilization* by Joseph Rodes Buchanan, and he soon became convinced that Buchanan was, indeed, talking about the same thing.

Buchanan writes: 'My investigations of the nervous system of man for the last twelve years [this was written about 1854] have clearly shown that its capacities are far more extensive, varied and interesting than physiologists or philosophers have been willing to acknowledge.' And he tells how his first clue came in a conversation with Bishop Polk of the Episcopal Church: '. . . he informed me that his own sensibility was so acute, that if he should, by accident, touch a piece of brass, even in the night, when he could not see what he touched, he immediately felt the influence through his system, and could recognize the offensive metallic taste.' Buchanan then inquired around for other people of 'acute sensibility', and tested them with various substances. He quickly became convinced that these 'sensitives' could not only distinguish various metals by touch alone, but substances such as sugar, salt, pepper, and so on. He reached the straightforward and sensible conclusion that our hands have the same power to distinguish 'tastes' as our tongues, but to a lesser degree. But that seemed to be brought into question by the fact that his sensitives could also distinguish various substances *when wrapped in layers of paper*. He went on to a further astonishing discovery. These people could hold a letter—in its envelope—in their hands, and tell what emotions were felt by the

writer. Happiness and grief were the easiest to 'pick up' but the more skilled 'psychometrists' could also sense whether the letter had been written by a man or a woman, and describe the writer's character traits.

Buchanan's friend William Denton, a professor of geology, pursued a similar series of experiments with even more fascinating results. Denton discovered that his 'sensitives' could accurately describe the origin of geological specimens. A meteor fragment conjured up an image of immense heat and black depths of space. The tooth of a sabre-toothed tiger not only conjured up a picture of the animal, but of its prehistoric surroundings. A limestone pebble with glacial scratches evoked an image of being deep under an immense body of water, then of being frozen in a mass of ice that grinds and lurches slowly along. A lava fragment from Hawaii evoked a picture of an island surrounded by ocean, and of an erupting volcano.

Denton summarized his researches in these words: 'From the first dawn of light upon this infant globe . . . nature has been photographing every moment.'

And Buchanan wrote: 'Aye, the mental telescope is now discovered which may pierce the depths of the past and bring us in full view of the grand and tragic passages of ancient history.'

All this left Bowen stunned, exhilarated, and a little cast down. It was clear that his experience was not as unique as he thought. Yet it also seemed perfectly obvious that Buchanan and Denton had failed to follow up their insights. What had happened (he discovered from Miss O'Keefe) was that psychometry had been regarded increasingly as a branch of 'spiritualism'. Certain mediums began to specialize in it. So the scientists, who had never been very interested, were able to dismiss the whole thing as just another 'psychic' delusion.

All of which meant that the field was still wide open to Bowen. The only problem was where to begin. Buchanan and Denton had spent years experimenting with 'sensitives', and recording their experiments. Bowen felt this was a mistake. What he wanted to do was to develop this power *in himself*, and see just how far it could be extended. He spent a year in Connecticut trying to develop his 'negative capability'.

In June 1973 he wrote to me: 'I seem to have reached a kind of plateau. I can now induce the state, and stay in it for minutes at a

time. But I don't seem to be able to get any *further*. It's all immensely frustrating. I feel like a donkey tethered to a post, and no matter which way I go, I soon reach the limit of my rope. . . .'

And I also began to feel that Bowen had reached the limit of his natural powers. His letters were long, but they were also repetitive, and the underlying sense of frustration was obvious.

In my replies, I did my best to be helpful, and to suggest new lines of research. I was engaged in writing a sequel to *The Occult*, and was fascinated by the career of the late Tom Lethbridge, the historian and archaeologist who retired to a cottage in Devon and came to believe that a pendulum can reveal the secrets of nature. I discovered that I could use a dowsing rod, and that it reacted powerfully around standing stones—like the one on the clifftop. What seemed even more incredible was that really skilled dowsers could detect water by holding the divining rod—or pendulum—over a map. Lethbridge, like Bowen, was convinced that there was nothing supernatural about all this. He simply believed that there is a part of the mind—you could call it the subconscious or the superconscious—that responds to energies to which our conscious mind is 'blind'. But although Bowen was interested, he did not share my excitement. It began to dawn on me that Bowen was the most impressive example of a one-track mind that I have ever come across.

3

A friend to whom I told this story said that he could not understand why I had not taken the first opportunity to visit Stoke Warmington and examine Pig Lane and Slaughter Row for myself. It is true that most of my family lives in Leicester, and that it would have been easy enough to make the slight detour when I was driving there from Cornwall. But it seemed somehow pointless; I was certain that I would be insensitive to the place. Then, in January 1974, when I was driving back from Leicester with my wife, she suggested that it might be worth investigating the spot with a divining rod—she is a far better dowser than I am.

We arrived there just before lunch on a rainy Monday morning, and parked behind the Swan. Since lunch would not be served until half-past twelve we decided to go and look at the

place immediately, and walked the hundred yards in a thin, misty downpour. Like Bowen, we approached Slaughter Row from Pig Lane. My wife had her dowsing rod with her—two strips of black whalebone (from an old corset) joined at the end with sellotape. As soon as she entered the lane—holding the dowsing rod in front of her—Joy said: 'Look at this.' The rod had twisted upright in her hands so that it was parallel with her body. She walked further into the alleyway, then said: 'Can you smell it?' I was right behind her, but I could smell nothing. She wrinkled her nose. 'It's horrible.'

I borrowed the rod from her. At first nothing happened. I went back to the bollard, and walked slowly forward. Immediately, the rod twisted in my hands. Then I smelt it too—a very faint smell not unlike bad meat—although in retrospect it seemed to be more like bad sewers. I lowered the rod and sniffed, trying to locate the source of the smell, but it was gone immediately. A moment later, holding the rod—which was reacting—I could smell it again. The rod continued to react powerfully as I approached a kind of embrasure in the wall, at a point where the slaughter-house wall ended—it had obviously once been a door, but was now bricked up. Joy was standing behind me, and said: 'I can feel it here, even without the rod.'

It was an amazing experience. There is no doubt whatever in my mind that this particular spot is the epicentre, so to speak, of some sort of electromagnetic phenomenon. It may, I think, have been somehow amplified by the damp atmosphere—I have often noticed that the dowsing rod reacts more on damp days. And it *was* so strong that even I could detect it without the rod. It is true that it was only a faint sensation, and that I might not have noticed it unless I had been looking for it. But it *was* there, as distinct as a faint electric shock.

After lunch we went back again, approaching the wall from the Fore Street end of the Market Hall. This time, I felt nothing whatever. Joy still got a reaction with the dowsing rod, but she agreed that it was now very faint. I am not sure whether our intake of food and wine made us less sensitive, or whether the strength of the 'vortex' (or whatever it is) varies with different times of the day. Since that time, half a dozen friends have visited the spot—most of them enthusiastic 'ley hunters'—and all have agreed that it *is* an objective phenomenon. But if I began

to cite their experiences, this account would become impossibly long.

4

When I arrived home that evening, I found a pile of letters and parcels waiting for me. The first letter was from Bowen, and contained an account of his latest experiments. A friend had persuaded him to try smoking marihuana to increase his 'sensitivity'. The result, he said, was frustrating. It *did* relax him enormously, which increased his sensitivity. But it also produced what he called 'a muzzy sense of felicity' that made him somehow unable to take advantage of his sensitivity. He went on to make the following interesting observation: 'It is as if I have two people inside my head: one an incorrigible chatterbox, who refuses to be quiet for more than a few seconds at a time, and the other an inarticulate and unsophisticated child who *knows* far more but can't express it. And every time the child gets up a little confidence to express herself, the chatterbox interupts with a flood of inanities.' And he reminded me of a passage I had quoted in *The Outsider*, in which T. E. Lawrence said that he longed to be as simple and natural as a soldier with his arm around a girl, but that his 'jailer' prevented him—the jailer being the critical intellect.

The same post contained a letter from Idries Shah, the Sufi mystic, enclosing a book called *The Psychology of Consciousness* by Robert Ornstein. I began to read it before I went to bed, and was soon so excited that I no longer felt like sleep. Ornstein was obviously speaking about Bowen's problem: that 'conceptions often act as barriers to understanding'. But it was the third chapter, on the 'Two Sides of the Brain', that came as a revelation. Although split-brain research has been around since the mid-1960s, I had never heard about it, except in some popular article that mentioned that the left half of the brain controls language and the right half controls musical and artistic abilities. The left verbalizes; the right recognizes.

What I did not know is that if the corpus callosum—the knot of nerve fibres connecting the two hemispheres—is severed, there are suddenly *two different persons* inside your head. Ornstein says: 'If, for instance, the patient felt a pencil (hidden from sight) in his right hand, he could verbally describe it, as would be

normal. But if the pencil was in his left hand, he could not describe it at all. Recall that the left hand informs the right hemisphere, which does not possess any capability for speech.'

This, of course, was Bowen's 'inarticulate and unsophisticated child', while the left hemisphere is the 'chatterbox'. In split-brain patients, the two even have different emotional reactions. If the right brain is shown an obscene picture, the patient blushes. *Asked* why he is blushing, he replies 'I don't know.' For the 'I' who replies is the 'rational I' in the left hemisphere. We have two different people living inside our heads. *And the left half calls itself 'you'.*

All this excited me enormously; if I had had Bowen's telephone number I would have called him immediately. Instead, I wrote him a long letter the next morning, advising him to get the book.

The result was exactly what I had expected. Like me, Bowen had known nothing of split-brain research, and this simple piece of information—that we have two different people inside our heads, and that the 'rational' one calls itself 'you'—brought a flood of insight. The result was the most remarkable letter I ever received from him, which I intend to quote at length. I have so far deliberately avoided quoting Bowen's letters, except in brief, or his account of his original experience in Slaughter Row, because the copyright belongs to him, and I have not received his permission. But it would be absurd to try and paraphrase his most important insights. After describing his excitement as he read Ornstein's book, he goes on:

'It is appropriate that you should have introduced [me] to this discovery . . . and that you should have illustrated it by quoting Lawrence's 'jailer'. For it was your other quotation from Lawrence that gave me my first important clue: his description of how he set out early one morning "on one of those clear dawns that wake up the senses with the sun, while the intellect, tired after the thinking of the night, was yet abed.

'[For an hour or two, on such a morning, the sounds and scents and colours of the world struck man individually and directly, not filtered through or made typical by thought . . ."]* For that is the essence of my quest.

* My addition in square brackets; I have also corrected Bowen's version of the quotation.

'You see, to put it very simply, the knowledge that came to me that day [at Stoke Warmington] was that if only we could escape the jailer, we would no longer be confined to the present moment; as Buchanan says, the history of the world would become ours to explore.

'From that moment on, I became a revolutionary. The socialists of the nineteenth century had a similar kind of revelation. They suddenly decided that the world has gone hopelessly wrong because of the institution of private property, and that the golden age could be achieved only by abolishing it and treating the exploiters like criminals. Like you, I could never swallow this naïve fallacy. But I believe my own insight has more solid foundation. It is the recognition that, ever since he learned to walk upright, man has become the prisoner of this jailer in the left hemisphere of his brain. He is like the man in that picture of Newgate Prison you showed me, with the great ball and chain attached to his ankles and his waist and his wrists.

'To put it another way: the human mind as we know it is really a great concrete corridor down the *center* of the human spirit. On either side, there are thousands of corridors leading to other parts of the structure. Yet we continue to plod up and down that central corridor, which gets dirtier and more disgusting as the years go by, never dreaming that we only have to stand still for a moment, and then take the first turn to the right or left, to be *in a completely different area of the mind.*

'The villain, of course, is "force of habit", which is in the pay of the left [hemisphere]. And since the left is basically a neurotic—a nagger, an interrupter, a worrier—it uses habit to keep us confined to that central corridor, like an over-anxious mother who refuses to allow her children to play in the street.

'You have provided me with the major clue. The question now is: how can I use it to escape the jailer?'

I sympathized with his position. In fact, I thought and talked about nothing but Bowen for weeks. What interested me so deeply was that Bowen had voluntarily placed himself in the position of one of my 'Outsiders'. Like 'the Outsider', he felt that life is immensely more significant than most people realize, and that it is worth devoting your life to pursuing those glimpses of meaning. In order to do this, he had thrown up the academic world and was living a frugal existence on the Connecticut farm. He

had placed himself in the position of T. E. Lawrence, Van Gogh, Nijinksy, Nietzsche—yet, I had to admit, without possessing their genius. So what were his chances of solving the problem that had destroyed them?

My next communication from Bowen was a short postcard. 'In your Maslow book, you say that no one understands the nature of hypnosis. I do. It puts the left brain to sleep while leaving the right wide awake.' That was all.

In the spring of 1975, I accepted a post as a visiting professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey; I have to admit that one of my motives in accepting was to go and see Bowen. I had not heard from him since April of the previous year; but his wife Jacqueline had written to tell me that he had become involved in experiments in hypnosis—as I had guessed—and had almost given up speaking. What he was trying to do was plain enough: to move his sense of identity to the right half of his brain, to train the left to stop 'interfering'. By now I had an almost proprietorial feeling about Bowen; I felt that the outcome of his experiments mattered as much to me as to him.

I rang their farm from Philadelphia (where I was living). It was Jacqueline who answered. She seemed glad to hear from me, and invited us all over for the weekend. We flew from Philadelphia to Hartford, changing planes at New York, and arrived there at four o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Mrs Bowen met us at the airport.

Jacqueline Bowen is a well built, cheerful woman who always seems to be smiling—I remember thinking, as she drove us back, that Bowen was lucky to have found himself a wife who could obviously look after him. She was a farmer's daughter who, fortunately for Bowen, had never much liked the academic setting. So she had been surprised, but not too concerned, when he told of his decision to resign his post at Saskatchewan. She much prefers horses and cows and chickens to faculty parties. The farm had been run by a hired man, but he was in his seventies, and was glad to retire.

As we drove, Mrs Bowen brought me up to date.

The trouble had started soon after my letter about the Ornstein book. Bowen heard of a cousin who had been cured from smoking a hundred cigarettes a day by a hypnotist on Long Island. He went to see the man and explained his project; the

hypnotist agreed to take part in the experiments for an enormous fee. Ten thousand dollars sounds to me preposterous, but I am told that it is not unusual for America. Mrs Bowen had to accompany him on his twice-weekly trips to Long Island because he wanted her to be present to observe everything that happened. She was angry about the expense, but there was nothing she could do about it. Apparently, Bowen proved to be an excellent hypnotic subject. Under hypnosis, the psychiatrist—whose name I shall not mention, since I see no point in giving him free publicity—suggested to him that his *identity* would move from the left to the right side of his head. 'When you wake up, the person who looks out of your eyes will not be the person called Richard Bowen. It will be the baby who was born in your body fifty-eight years ago. . . .' The hypnotist's task was to regress Bowen to babyhood, and to try to make him once again accustomed to looking at the world *without the use of words.*

From Bowen's point of view, these experiments had been highly successful. His wife said that after the first session he seemed to be utterly relaxed and in a state of enchantment with everything he saw as they drove along the Long Island freeway. At one point he said: 'It's like LSD, but more controllable.' He also said: 'This is how I felt that first day at Stoke Warmington.'

For a few weeks, he seemed to radiate a quiet happiness and excitement. Then gradually, as the 'treatment' continued, he became obviously dissatisfied. He explained that the journey from Hartford to Long Island was destroying the benefit of the hypnotic sessions; he wanted to sell the farm and move to Long Island. Jacqueline opposed this. At this point, she came across a book about 'bio-feedback'—the technique of allowing someone to look at his own brain-wave patterns, to induce a mood of deep calm (alpha rhythms). This seemed to offer the ideal solution, especially when they discovered a doctor who specialized in the techniques in Providence, Rhode Island—less than an hour away from their farm near Woonsocket. Jacqueline pointed out that if they had kept the ten thousand dollars, he could have bought himself the most up-to-date bio-feedback equipment and installed it at the farm; but Bowen seemed to have no regrets. He found bio-feedback even more satisfactory than hypnosis, and told her he was making real progress. But during the past six weeks, he had been suffering from periods of depression. She

hoped our visit would make him feel better.

I thought I knew the answer to Bowen's fits of depression. A British researcher had recently come up with the interesting information that the 'self' in the right half of the brain is more pessimistic than the one that inhabits the left. No one seems to be sure why this is so, although the answer may be that the left—being the equivalent of an overworked housewife, always busy with practical affairs—is simply less introspective.

It was one of the strangest weekends I have ever spent. I was struck by how much Bowen had aged; he seemed to be smaller and thinner. At the same time, there was something about him that impressed me. I can only call it an air of *power*. He was 'withdrawn', but not with that helpless, defensive quality of the romantic who finds the world too brutal. He gave me the impression of a man who *knows* a great deal, and who finds the people around him too naïve to be worth talking to.

At supper that evening, he struck me as quiet, self-contained and happy. Our two boys were unusually noisy, rushing in and out with war whoops; Bowen looked at them with a kindly, affectionate eye. I saw no sign of the depression his wife had mentioned.

After the meal we sat in his study and talked. I told him about the book I was writing—a sequel to *The Occult*, as I've mentioned—and of a case I had discovered of a girl who had somehow slipped backwards in time. She had walked around the old church at Fotheringhay, and actually seen it as it had been in the sixteenth century. There was not even an effect of double-exposure; the church looked perfectly normal and solid. It was not until she went back the next day that she realized she was now in a different church. Research revealed that the church *she* had seen the day before had been destroyed in the time of Lady Jane Grey.*

Bowen was excited by this—I thought he was even a little envious.

'What caused it?'

I said that the girl, Jane O'Neill, had probably been suffering from delayed shock; she had been a witness of a bad road accident some time before.

* See my *Mysteries*, p. 361 *et seq.*

Bowen said: 'Yes, that's it. If the unconscious can be activated by a shock, it can do all kinds of things.'

He began to describe his own experiences since I had last seen him, but in a brief, perfunctory way, as if it bored him. I asked if he had had any more glimpses of the past.

'Once or twice. But nothing like that original experience in England.'

'And did you get any other results?'

'Results?'

I thought I could detect an undertone of scorn.

'Yes, I got some results.' He stood up and looked out of the window into the yard. 'I'll give you a demonstration if you like. You see Sheba?' He pointed to the huge yellow dog, that looked as if it was covered with a hairy rug. 'I can call her.'

He took his chair, and turned it towards the wall in the far corner of the room. He was now out of sight of the window. I could see the dog from where I was standing. Suddenly, the animal looked up and over her shoulder, as if she heard a noise. Then she slowly raised herself to her feet, and ambled in through the back door. A moment later, she was scratching on the door to be admitted. When I let her in, she walked straight over to Bowen, who scratched her ears. It was an impressive demonstration. Bowen had not moved from his chair during the whole time, and had certainly not made any movement or sound.

Just as I was starting to ask questions, a loud crash made me jump out of my chair. A vase had fallen off the shelf and broken in the hearth. At first I thought that the draught from the open door had caused it; then I realized that the evening was perfectly still.

Jacqueline Bowen came in. She said: 'Oh *no*. Not Aunty May's wedding present.'

'I never liked it anyway,' Bowen said.

We went to bed without discussing it further. I lay awake for a long time.

5

By midday on Saturday, there was no doubt in my mind: the Bowens had a poltergeist. At breakfast, the kitchen door kept opening, even when Mrs Bowen placed a bucket of potatoes

against it. As I was following Bowen in from a walk later that morning, the bulb fell out of the hall light at my feet. Like most American bulbs, it screws into its socket; moreover, it had been switched on not long before it fell: it was hot when I picked it up. I screwed it back in, and verified that it would not switch on until it was screwed tight into the socket. It could not have been loose just before it fell.

At four o'clock the next morning we were all awakened by loud crashes that sounded as if the house were being invaded by burglars. I went out of the bedroom, and found Mrs Bowen in her dressing-gown. The hall downstairs was full of books. They had fallen off a bookcase that stood against the wall—every one of them; but the case was upright, and there was no way the books could have fallen off naturally. We left them until morning. Bowen did not even bother to get out of bed.

The next morning, Bowen looked strained and tired; he said he had a headache. And later, he consented to talk about it all into my tape recorder. Again, I cannot quote from this without his permission. But he admitted that he knew he was the cause of the phenomena. He said his ears burned just before any 'accident' occurred. But he had no idea of what would happen, and no way of preventing it.

It confirmed a theory I had arrived at independently: that it is that other 'self' inside the brain that causes poltergeist effects. It does this when it becomes angry or frustrated—this is why the 'focus' of most poltergeist activity is a disturbed adolescent. I have no idea of what energies are used.

After Bowen had finished talking into my tape recorder, he seemed relaxed and cheerful. It struck me that it was almost as if another person had taken over his body. The worry and strain had vanished; the 'magician' was back.

That evening he gave us a remarkable demonstration of mind reading. He duplicated drawings that we had placed in sealed envelopes; he made Sheba obey his orders while he sat blindfolded. In a card-guessing experiment, his score was over ninety per cent. Finally, he took my wife's wedding ring—which she inherited from an aunt—and described several owners and the houses where they had lived. Joy said that when he talked about things she knew, he was incredibly accurate.

That night, few of us got any sleep. The window in our bed-

room slammed down—the sash cord had broken. Doors banged. The books all fell off the hall case again. Thumps sounded from the roof overhead. And in the morning, the contents of the coal scuttle had been dumped into the kitchen sink. Bowen came down to breakfast looking like an old man, then went back to bed with several aspirins. Jacqueline drove us to the airport to catch a 'plane at eleven o'clock. I can't pretend we were sorry to leave.

She told us that this weekend had been worse than she had ever known. Objects *had* fallen off shelves before our arrival, but she had assumed it was accident. Both she and I had the same suspicion—that it was my arrival that had caused the trouble. The vase had fallen off the shelf immediately after he had 'called' Sheba by telepathy; the night's disturbances followed our evening of paranormal experiment. But it was also—I am convinced—because I had persuaded Bowen to *talk* so much. The 'I' who talks is in the left side of the brain; it is the rational ego. Whenever Bowen had talked too much, he became tense and exhausted. And the right half of his brain got its own back by producing the poltergeist effects. When he relaxed, the right took over, and looked out through his eyes—and the 'magician' was back in control. There was no need for it to signify its disapproval by smashing vases . . .

6

At present, this story has no ending.

In July 1975, shortly after we came back to England, Jacqueline Bowen telephoned us from Woonsocket to ask if we had seen her husband. Bowen had left the house while she was away on a weekend visit to her mother. He had taken his passport, and withdrawn most of the money from his personal account. He left her a note telling her that he would be back in a couple of weeks, and advising her not to worry. She said it was an affectionate note, but brief. She took it to the local police, but they said there was nothing they could do. Her husband was healthy and in his right mind; he had taken only his own money; they had no right to intervene. She rang us, hoping that Bowen might have decided to come back to England, perhaps to revisit Stoke Warmington. I actually rang the Swan in Stoke Warmington to check whether Bowen had been there; the manager

was helpful when I explained the problem, but said that no one of that name or description had stayed in the hotel recently.

Bowen has never returned to Woonsocket. A private detective hired by Mrs Bowen discovered that he had taken a 'plane from New York to São Paulo, Brazil, two days after he had left home. A check with the customs and emigration authorities at São Paulo revealed that he had landed there on Flight 917 on the afternoon of 29 June 1975. But there is no record of his staying in any São Paulo hotel. The trail ends there, at the airport.

The only clue so far has been provided by Dr Meyer Waldman of the Philosophy Department at Saskatchewan University. Unaware of Bowen's disappearance, he wrote to him in September 1975, mentioning the name of a German doctor in Nossa Senhora da Glória, in Brazil, and giving his address. Mrs Bowen telephoned Dr Waldman to ask what it was all about. It seemed that Waldman had met Bowen accidentally in New York the previous May, at La Guardia, and they had spent half an hour in the bar discussing split-brain research. Waldman had mentioned a brilliant German brain surgeon who, because of a certain problem with the law, had moved to a town near São Paulo, Brazil. Bowen seemed to be deeply interested in a story about the surgeon's treatment of a case of epilepsy by dividing the two lobes of the brain—by severing the corpus callosum. (This is, in fact, a standard technique for treating epilepsy.) He told Waldman that he would like to write to the surgeon asking for details, and requested his address. It had taken Waldman three months to get a reply from the surgeon . . .

Jacqueline Bowen looked up Nossa Senhora da Glória in an atlas, and noticed an interesting thing: it is close to a town called São Paulo. But not *the* São Paulo; this São Paulo is some thousands of miles away from the port, on the Peruvian border.

The mention of a brain surgeon seemed to confirm Jacqueline Bowen's worst suspicion. It was, I must confess, an idea that had also crossed my mind during that weekend at their farm: that Bowen wanted to undergo the split-brain operation. This seems to be confirmed by a remark he makes in the taped interview. I comment that the right brain seems to have no sense of time, and add jokingly that my wife seems to be dominated by her right hemisphere. Bowen says: 'No, time is a left-brain function. The left keeps us trapped in the world of time. It can understand the

world only in terms of temporal sequence . . .' It struck me then that, since Bowen's aim was to escape the world of time, he must have given some thought to the split-brain operation.

And suppose he became tired of waiting for Waldman to send him the surgeon's address, and set out to find him in a place near São Paulo . . . ? Waldman confirmed that he tried to remember where the surgeon lived, but could only remember that it was a place called 'Nosso', near São Paulo. Bowen may have tried to find 'Nosso' in an atlas; unless he had a good atlas, it would have been hard to find, because it is only a small town. Mrs Bowen confirms that it is not marked on the only atlas at the farm. So he took a plane to São Paulo assuming that it would be easy enough to find once he was on the spot. Did it then dawn on him that there is a second São Paulo in Brazil, and that a few kilometres away, on the Rio Ipixuna, there is a town called Nossa Senhora da Glória, Our Lady of Glory. . . ?

The Brazilian police were highly cooperative. They called on the surgeon in Nossa Senhora; he denied all knowledge of a Canadian professor. But the police found other irregularities, and he was arrested; he is at present serving a term of two years in prison.*

On the evidence, I have no doubt that Richard Bowen left home with the intention of undergoing the split-brain operation. Mrs Bowen has since discovered that he had approached a brain surgeon in New York with the same proposal, and was turned down. And even supposing he failed to reach Nossa Senhora, I find it hard to believe that he would have any difficulty in persuading some Brazilian surgeon to perform the operation for a few thousand dollars. (He had over $8,000 when he left home.)

And what would have been the result? According to Sperry, and others who have examined split-brain patients, there is no obvious change; the patient appears perfectly normal. (Sperry records that one patient was unable to speak for a month, but thereafter showed no impairment of the speech faculty.) But the left side of the brain no longer knows what the right is seeing, and vice versa.

It was, of course, completely logical for Bowen to think of

* Since writing the above, I have heard that he died in prison; I can therefore mention his name, Carl Pirkheimer. He was sentenced to two years for possessing instruments of abortion.

having such an operation. In Western man, there can be no doubt that the left side of the brain—the 'rational ego'—is far more active than the right, and that its furious acitivity *drowns* the voice of the right, as the noise of machinery can drown the human voice. Bowen was convinced that his 'timeslip' in Warwickshire was due to the temporary *passivity* of the left—due to fatigue and the pain of his knee—so that the voice of the right could finally be heard. From then on, all his efforts were concentrated on 'silencing' the left hemisphere and encouraging the right. It was obvious to me, during that weekend at Woonsocket, that to a large extent he had succeeded. (An article about my observations that weekend will be published in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*.) But he felt that he was somehow 'tied' to the left hemisphere, like a tethered donkey, and that until the rope was cut, he would be unable to explore the potential of the right. At present, it must be admitted that we do not know enough about the functions of the hemispheres to know whether his reasoning was correct.

I must record my own view that he made a fundamental error. My own reasoning may be faulty, but it seems to me that moods of mystical illumination or visionary insight spring from a process of *feedback* between the two halves. The business of the left hemisphere is to verbalize the intentions of the right, to turn feelings (or insights) into words. My own apprenticeship as a writer was a long and painful struggle to capture feelings in words; the words seemed to destroy the feelings, or leave them torn and mangled. Gradually, I became better at it until, like a good tennis player, I could hit the ball from any angle as it came bouncing out of my right hemisphere. And when I am writing well, I take an increasing delight in the way that I can turn intuitions into words, and the way that the words *throw a new light on the intuitions*. The right hemisphere gets enthusiastic as the left turns its insights into words, and sends more insights. The result is an increasingly elegant game of tennis. Bowen thought it would improve the game to kill off one of the players.

Another insight came to me when I was reading Thomas Mann's novel *Buddenbrooks*. One of the later chapters describes the holidays at the seaside that enchant Hanno Buddenbrook, a child who has the temperament of a poet. Yet the holidays, which are supposed to make him more vital and healthy, fail of their

purpose. 'These four weeks of sheltered peace and adoration of the sea had not hardened him: they had made him softer than ever, more dreamy and more sensitive.' The family doctor cannot understand: Hanno seems *less* healthy after his holiday.

My own expriences of deep relaxation confirm this. In certain moods, with the aid of autosuggestion, I can soothe myself into a mood of such deep tranquillity that my pulse becomes almost imperceptible. But it also brings a sense of nervous debility, like soaking for too long in a hot bath. I find the sensation delightful, but have no desire to repeat it too often. Moods of real insight bring a surge of vitality that seems to combine relaxation and intensity.

So I am inclined to believe that Bowen made a logical error—and may have discovered it too late. But a friend who conducts classes in transcendental meditation emphatically disagrees. He says my outlook is too 'positivistic'—that is, unconsciously dominated by the left side of my brain. He argues that if Bowen had succeeded in transferring his sense of identity to the right cerebral hemisphere, then the split-brain operation might well produce a kind of nirvana. What repels me is that this would mean an end to learning, which involves the active cooperation of the two halves. (Think, for example, of playing a musical instrument; the right produces the music, but it could not do it unless the left had first mastered the technique.) My friend replies that, to a man in a state of nirvana, learning would be superfluous. I must admit, according to his own logic, he is right.

My friend also makes the practical point that there are at least three monastic communes on the Brazilian side of the Eastern Cordilleras—one of them within a hundred miles of Nossa Senhora. Bowen could now be living in one of these, staring serenely into space, his mind able to move freely into the remote past—perhaps even into the future.

No doubt, one of these days, someone will take the trouble to go out and look for him. But if they find him, I doubt whether he will have any desire to communicate what he has discovered.

Eve Devereux

MT (AND HENCE TO BE FILLED)

Here is a short story that takes a couple of stock sf ideas, tangles them up together, and then sticks out a tongue at both.

In all the stories that you read about great (fictional) scientific breakthroughs, there is a carefully structured scene of suspense as a cluster of dedicated men—fighting furiously for non-existent government funds—huddle around a device that they, and only they, know is going to change the entire course of human civilization.

In real life, of course, it's a very different thing, as doubtless you will have read in numerous works of popular science. Teams of researchers wearing interchangeable white overalls while away the time until five o'clock by playing three-dimensional noughts and crosses with the computer—until suddenly, in the midst of all this lethargy, someone quite accidentally unearths the formula for a new and improved washing powder. It's yet another of those cases of truth being even more boring than fiction.

So I feel that I have on my hands a double task; or, if you like, a credibility gap of double the standard width to span. First of all, I propose to tell you a story that you may well find beyond the boundaries of belief; secondly, I must ask you to suspend your disbelief just long enough to survive my opening scene.

You see, the truth is this:

There were five of us gathered intensely around what we hoped was to become the world's first matter transmitter (MT). We were dedicated, all right—there can be no doubt about that—and each for a very different reason. First of all there was Willoughby, that great genius whose quasicommunist affiliations had banned him for ever from either the sultry realms of academia or the cloak-and-dagger prep-schoolishness of secret

government research: he it was whose fertile brain had first conceived the MT; who had with paper, pen and pocket calculator performed the mathematical abstractions required to put his dreams into practice. Then there was Evans, a Welshman of few words but of considerable engineering skill, who, using the dry equations of Willoughby's nocturnal labours, had translated a possibility into the humming, ominous artifact that lay in the laboratory before us. In contrast, Kiespolo was a man of many words—a reporter for one of those small newspapers whose editor had pipe-dreams of making it a large newspaper. Willoughby had for this very reason approached Kiespolo early: if there had to be press coverage for the Great Occasion then he wanted it to be sympathetic press coverage. The only woman among us was Elspeth—I never did discover her second name—a somewhat menacing woman of indeterminate age whose squat reptilian figure could daily be seen crouched over a broom which she pushed mechanically around the laboratory. Her presence was always marked by a ubiqitous rain of cigarette ash which, instead of swirling to the floor in a dandruffy cloud, was somehow able to fashion itself into little cylinders that looked like nothing more than desiccated mouse-droppings.

And finally there was myself, Arnold Armstrong III, who had provided the money for the whole operation; in a quiet, desperate way, perhaps my dedication was the most profound of all.

A similar scene was, we knew, being staged a kilometre away in our other laboratory. There, a small band of technicians under the able leadership of young Cronin was, doubtless, huddled around the sullen receiving cubicle: empty now but soon, we hoped, to be filled.

The air was full of such tangible tension that you could have taken a handful of it and used it as chewing-gum. The pregnant silence was ruptured suddenly by a creak of wheels behind us as Oates and Wilde, the two lab assistants, pushed towards us on an antiquated trolley the large fablundium cube that was to become the first solid matter to pass through the gaping maw of the MT. Some seventy-five kilograms of lifeless matter: it seemed almost a shame to me, in a moment of romantic fancy, that it could have no way of experiencing the fantastic adventure it was about to undergo.

'Place the block in the cubicle,' said Willoughby, spitting out a

severed fingernail but showing otherwise no signs of apprehension.

Without a word Oates and Wilde obeyed, tipping the cube—which, a metre by a metre by a metre, was unwieldy—into that engulfing cavity. It landed with a malevolent thump.

'That's one small lurch for a cube, one giant stride for mankind,' muttered Kiespolo reflectively. I began to wonder about Willoughby's judgement.

'Stand back!' snapped Willoughby. 'The experiment is about to begin!'

We all retreated respectfully, with the exception of Evans, whose job it was to throw the lever that would set the MT into action, dissembling the atoms of the fablundium block and transmitting them instantaneously across the kilometre between where we stood and that other laboratory where, presumably as tense as we, Cronin and the rest were watching the receiving cubicle in which the atoms should be reassembled to form what would be to all intents and purposes the same block of fablundium!

It was an exciting moment, and I think that all of us were aware that we were watching history in the making.

There was a silence as the electronic clock on the wall edged its way inexorably on towards the precise hour of midnight, a silence broken only by the sound of Elspeth lighting another cigarette.

The long red second-hand swept finally towards the twelve, and under his breath Evans began the countdown.

'. . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . *now*!'

And he pulled the lever down with all his might.

I suppose, although we knew it was nonsense, that we'd all been expecting—perhaps even hoping for—a sparkling and a crackling straight from the climax to a horror movie: almost to our disappointment there was none of that—just a sort of pungent stillness.

'Has it worked?' asked Kiespolo after a moment.

'Give it a chance,' replied Elspeth, coughing paroxysmally.

'I hope it damn' well has worked,' I added sardonically. 'There's half a million dollars of my wife's money tied up in this, you know.'

'Don't worry,' Evans interposed. 'I'm just about to open the

cubicle, and you'll see that the cube has disappeared, and in just a moment or two we'll get a 'phone-call from our friends in the other laboratory to say that they've got our cube in their cubicle.'

'D'you think you could rephrase that?' asked Kiespolo, notebook at the ready.

'No,' Evans replied, slowly raising the lever as he spoke. The door of the cubicle popped open—it reminded me at the time of the lid of a jack-in-the-box—and there we saw, to our astonishment, nothing other than the original block of fablundium, totally unchanged.

'Some story this is,' remarked Kiespolo after a bitter pause.

Just then the 'phone rang and I, being the nearest, picked it up.

'It's amazing,' came Cronin's voice down the line. 'It really works! The cube is here, safe and sound. It's even got your initials carved on it! At last the great spaces of the Universe, in all their stark magnificence, are open to Man! We can . . .'

I slammed the 'phone down before he could continue.

'Willoughby,' I began, 'seems to have invented something rather different from what he initially intended. His matter transmitter doesn't actually transmit matter, it duplicates it and sends the duplicate. Over at the other laboratory they have, in their cubicle, a block identical with the one that we failed to send them.'

I gestured at the cube of fablundium, wearisome in its immobility, while the information sank in.

'You mean,' said Evans, aghast, 'that at last we've learnt to duplicate matter; that at last there'll be no world hunger problem because one grain of rice can be made into two, into four, into eight, into . . . Oh, what have we done in our folly, tampering with the forces of Nature?'

'But that's ridiculous,' snapped Elspeth caustically, rolling herself another cigarette. 'If that were the case you'd have the paradox of creating matter out of nothing. I mean, I'm only a humble charwoman who left school at fourteen, but even I have a glancing acquaintanceship with the implications of the Law of Conservation of Energy. You just can't get matter from nowhere.'

'She's right, you know,' Kiespolo put in. 'Whatever goes to make up that cube must have come from somewhere.'

'We're amateurs,' I cried. 'We're groping in the dark, creating an apparent paradox where there may be no paradox at all.'

'That's right,' agreed Evans. 'The only one of us who can possibly hope to understand it is Willoughby.'

'That's a thought,' said Kiespolo, looking around: 'Just where the hell *is* Willoughby?'

Acknowledgements

Certain people must be thanked for their help and enthusiasm. At the risk of causing offence through accidental omission, these are, each for different reasons, as follows:

Janet Freer, of Michael Bakewell and Associates, for her interest, help, enthusiasm and downright hard work;

Paul Begg, of the Science Fiction Book Club, for his help in making sure that some of the stories in *Aries 1* actually arrived;

Iain Nicolson, for many conversations in 'Le Gamin' which, in a very roundabout and indirect way, had a certain effect on the shaping of this anthology;

David and Hazel Langford, who, probably without realizing it, contributed substantially to my final selection; and

Finally, my wife, for her lack of adverse comment on the difficulties of feeding a baby while tripping over piles of dog-eared manuscripts.

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Acknowledgement should be made to Elm Tree/St Georges Press for use, on page 62, of an extract from 'The Spider' by Michael Flanders, from *The Songs of Flanders and Swann*, published 1977.

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